

THE BATTLE FOR MEMORY: Culture, Cancellation, Context, and Collections

*THOU who stealest fire, From the fountains of the past,
To glorify the present, oh, haste, Visit my low desire!
Strengthen me, enlighten me! I faint in this obscurity,
Thou dewy dawn of memory.*

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*With youthful fancy re-inspired, We may hold converse with all forms
Of the many-sided mind, And those whom passion hath not blinded,
Subtle-thoughted, myriad-minded. My friend, with you to live alone
Were how much better than to own A crown, a sceptre, and a throne!*

[Ode to Memory \(Tennyson\)](#)

2017, Jly 28: In defence of memory How to avoid admitting we are wrong

GLAMOUR or ORDER: SHOULD WE ASPIRE TO BOTH?

Are differences in the way collectors and recordkeepers think such that we cannot safely fraternize? How do we want the public and our masters to think about what we do. Isn't this also part of the **Fight to Survive**?

TOXIC ASSETS; PLUNDER, REPATRIATION, and REPLEVIN

How do we manage records that inflame, offend, or lie? Is custody simply the last place of repose or a battlefield for conflicting claims?

LIVING IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

How has our society reached the point where alternative facts based on wishful thinking are believed, one where crime and deception are protected by draconian secrecy laws in the name of public safety, and where the ideology of extremists and terrorists becomes the response of intolerant governments? Is any of this really new?

SECRECY, SECURITY, SNOOPING, and SUPPRESSION

Secrecy laws and cover-ups. How documents can be used to expose wrong-doing and manipulated to hide it. Should secrecy laws be broken when they hide evidence of crime? Do draconian secrecy laws in the name of public safety protect us from the ideology of extremists and terrorists or succumb to it? Is any of this really new?

CULTURE WARS

Is critical theory a different kind of post-truth, masquerading as ethical relativism? What a difference a word makes. Statue Wars, Black Lives Matter, and other claims to justice confronting Houses of Memory. Are exhibitions "political" statements and, if so, who has the right to complain?

HOW SHOULD HOUSES OF MEMORY RESPOND?

What should we do if we want to continue carrying out our mission in the teeth of demands that we change coming from the culture warriors? Do we stiffen our resolve or submit? Can we change (without yielding to excess) but still honour our fundamental values while learning from impassioned calls for Justice? Memorialising. Do we follow the map or the compass?

2017, July 28: In defence of memory

On the lighter side, here is a Friday afternoon reflection. This is not really about r/keeping but it is about memory so it may be close enough to justify a posting here (apologies for posting to both lists). David Aaronovitch, reflecting on why Trump supporters don't ditch him and more generally on [how hard we all find it is to admit we're wrong](#), quotes from a book I must get hold of – Kathryn Schultz, *Being Wrong*. Her favourite (and mine) is the Millerites who sold or gave away everything in anticipation of the end of the world on 22 October, 1844. Instead of admitting you are wrong, we humans have an array of defences:

- The "timeframe" defence: it's still going to happen but I was a little out in my timing.

- The “near miss” defence: it almost happened – “if I hadn’t been wrong, I would have been right”.
- The “out of left field” defence: it was going to happen then something utterly unpredictable intervened (everything is unforeseeable if you fail to foresee it).
- The “I was wrong, but it’s your fault” defence: I was badly advised, trusted the wrong people, failed to follow my gut instincts.
- The “better safe than sorry” defence: thinking what I did and knowing what I knew then, it would have been wrong to do otherwise – “I did what I thought was right”.

Aaronovitch tells us that shortly before JFK’s assassination in 1963, 60% of Americans remembered voting for him; the figure rising to 65% after the assassination. In the actual 1960 election, he received 49.7%. It is interesting that all five defences have been used to excuse the unreliability of predictions about the effects of climate change based on modelling. No, I don’t doubt climate change, but I think scientists have done their cause little good by stepping aside from the pure science and becoming advocates of political action based on extrapolations (as fact) from their theoretical modelling.

It’s also similar to the standard Foreign Office response to crisis in *Yes, Prime Minister*:

- In Stage one we say nothing is going to happen.
- Stage two, we say something may be about to happen, but we should do nothing about it.
- In Stage three, we say that maybe we should do something about it, but there’s nothing we “can” do.
- Stage four, we say maybe there was something we could have done, but it’s too late now.

Or, the five standard excuses from the same authors:

- First there’s the excuse we used for instance in the Anthony Blunt case... That there is a perfectly satisfactory explanation for everything, but security forbids its disclosure.
- Second, there is the excuse we used for comprehensive schools, that it has only gone wrong because of heavy cuts in staff and budget which have stretched supervisory resources beyond the limits.
- Then there’s the excuse we used for Concorde, it was a worthwhile experiment, now abandoned, but not before it had provided much valuable data and considerable employment.
- The fourth, there’s the excuse we used for the Munich agreement. It occurred before certain important facts were known and couldn’t happen again. (Jim: What important facts?) Well, that Hitler wanted to conquer Europe. (Jim: I thought everybody knew that.) Not the Foreign Office.
- Five, there’s the Charge of the Light Brigade excuse. It was an unfortunate lapse by an individual which has now been dealt with under internal disciplinary procedures.

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Are differences in the way collectors and recordkeepers think such that we cannot safely fraternize? How do we want the public and our masters to think about what we do. Isn’t this also part of the **Fight to Survive**?

[2017, Jun 7: If they’re GLAM-orous, are they still records?](#) Are we collectors or recordkeepers?

[2018, Oct 2: Perth 2018 Description – Quo Vadis? What really matters?](#) Our values; our mission

[2018, Oct 24: Documenting Australian Society](#) Pondering what we’ve got (and what we haven’t)

[2020, Aug 13: News from WA](#) Selfies, face-masks, buildings and other ways archives are perceived

[2020, Nov 5: What would you do if you were independently wealthy?](#) Private collectors

[2021, Jan 2: Form vs function](#) Is a bar on the roof of the NSW State Library a step too far?

2017, June 7: If they’re GLAM-orous, are they still records?

GLAM = galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. This posting is prompted by the newly opened [heritage display](#) of foundation documents (He Toho) in the National Library building in

Molesworth St, Wellington. Two of these documents, the 1840 Treaty and the 1893 Women's Suffrage Petition, used to be on display in the "Treaty Room" at Archives NZ in Molesworth St. I'm not sure about where the Declaration of Independence was on show at that time (if at all). When I was at ArNZ, and had stewardship of the Treaty Room, I always wanted to revitalise it with an eye to better contextualisation and better story-telling (all good exhibitions are basically about telling a good story) – but I never had the money. I wanted to raise the profile of ArNZ and to "use" the documents to tell a recordkeeping story. I have long ago abandoned the fiction that documents speak for themselves.

The display page sits on the National Library web site, clearly badged as "National Library", and the only reference to ArNZ is at the bottom of the page alongside the NLNZ logo. No explanation is given for the two logos being there or what involvement ArNZ has (e.g. "kindly on permanent loan from Archives NZ"). If you drill down, ArNZ has more prominence given to it on subordinate pages describing each of the documents – again for no apparent reason. In custodial terms, it is not clear, so far as I could see, which of the two institutions (if they can still be described as two institutions – I haven't kept pace with legislative and administrative arrangements) is responsible for the documents or whether they are jointly deemed to have custody. The Library clearly has possession. He Toho is currently featured on the [Library's top page](#). Any connection between the display and ArNZ is here beyond obscure, it is invisible. Not unnaturally, the NLNZ top page promotes NLNZ only. Inviting messages are extended to researchers, schools, librarians, publishers, and business to visit Molesworth St – not a word to suggest that it might be worth a visit to ArNZ at Mulgrave St across the road. Curiously, the [ArNZ site](#) still promotes the [Treaty](#) and the [Petition](#) on its own exhibitions page as if nothing has changed. I found nothing on the ArNZ site about He Toho. Perhaps they just haven't caught up. The important issue to my mind is what role (if any) does ArNZ now have in how these documents are portrayed – especially if (heaven forefend) ArNZ has a different narrative to NLNZ – a recordkeeping narrative instead of (or as well as) a heritage narrative? Who has the last word?

In a post-custodial world, does any of this matter? NAA thought it did when it accepted deposit of records that are actually estrays filched from the archives of the Imperial Government in the UK and set them in a constitutional display in Canberra – "repatriation" it's called. Huh! I suppose it could be viewed as a creative use of top-numbering. The Canadians tried (and maybe accomplished) the same thing. The New Zealanders, who actually have significant constitutional documents of their own, haven't - so far as I know - tried it. Perhaps, in light of shenanigans in Canberra and Ottawa, we shouldn't be too critical of the de-contextualisation going on in Wellington. Such displays are partly intended to magnify the importance of the custodial institution (and, incidentally, to make it immune from more deadly shenanigans by politicians). But shouldn't archivists be purer than that and say that we don't care about asset stripping and it is the r/keeping programme, not the bureaucratic entity that supervises it, that is important? Shouldn't we view GLAM-orous activities as confusing and detrimental to our core mission? Got your attention now, haven't I?

My view is that we can (and should) use GLAM to promote r/keeping but not the other way round and that we should be very careful not to give comfort to those who would portray us as just another GLAM-orous heritage "collection" – a word that should be banned from the archivist's vocabulary. In other (more provocative) words, I think GLAM should be a subsidiary message, not a co-equal one. Claims that archives, despite being repositories of significant heritage materials, are part of a GLAM industry are not (in my view) helpful. Any marketing expert will tell you that having mixed messages defeats the purpose (though people in advertising and into self-promotion don't always get this). I cannot claim the documents in question were displayed in Mulgrave St any more effectively than they are now (on line) in Molesworth St. There was a lot of blather about the "constitutional" role of ArNZ around the time their supporters took the parent department to court (a gutsy move). But the message always seemed to me confused and possession of the documents was never well employed (in my view) to advance the idea that archivists support the constitution (and many other things besides) through recordkeeping in ways that librarians and curators cannot. Instead of promoting objects/resources as glamorous, we should be

actively preaching a different lesson – viz. that such a reading is in error if it obscures the r/keeping importance of the assets we manage. By all means support and facilitate other readings, but don't let anyone be mistaken about why WE think they're important.

That message is now so under-developed and its articulation so obscured by GLAM-orous enthusiasms that it is, perhaps, a lost cause. Terry Cook, who was not exactly on my side of the issue, tried to develop the debate many years ago but I don't feel it was resolved (unless being overwhelmed can be regarded as a resolution). Many archivists still want to have their cake and eat it – so that may be the resolution, a weak-minded duality instead of a single focus. What would the r/keeping message be in relation to these particular documents? Frankly, I don't know any more. You cannot craft a r/keeping narrative about the Treaty and the Petition absent a conceptual and cultural framework that links heritage to r/keeping and that we do not have. Archivists have allowed themselves to be so over-whelmed by GLAM that there is no over-arching message into which it could fit. I think the r/keeping message alone is still more-or-less strong but the link between r/keeping and heritage (which archivists are uniquely well placed to articulate) is weak.

PS My friend, John Cross, tells of vol.1 of the Convict Indents (I think). Debate over their destruction was referred to London. Nothing was done and eventually the series was deposited in NSW State Archives. Vol.1 languished in London and eventually found its way into the UK PRO. More than 50 years later, it was removed and sent back to Sydney to rejoin the rest of the series. Proper repatriation. Apparently, the London/Sydney correspondence petered out and was resumed when a letter was sent from Sydney beginning w/o further explanation "With reference to your letter of ... [date from many decades past]...". A true r/keeping story.

2017, June 8: <<Anna Blackman:... The documents, while they are on exhibition within the National Library building are in the custody of the Chief Archivist under the provisions of the Public Records Act 2005. Nothing happens to those documents without her say so. Archives NZ has been intimately involved with the project from the start...I agree that the He Tohu promotional material on the website does not make much of the connection with Archives NZ or the context of the documents, and it is a pity that Archives NZ has not yet updated their own website. The audience that the exhibition was designed for is secondary school pupils...When you actually visit the exhibition there is more obvious archival contextualisation of the documents...>>

2017, June 9: Thank you, Anna, for that clarification. To be clear, I was not going on about the relocation as such but about different ways in which these documents (wherever they are) can be contextualized - competing narratives if you prefer - and the question of who is responsible for crafting that. Such contextualization includes, of course, the documents' after-life: race relations, the treaty process, women in society not just as a backdrop but as relationships between the documents and their parallel provenance. It is an ultimate answer to the question: what do these documents mean? Parallel provenance is not just about indiscriminately displaying all aspects of cultural and social significance (however judged) but about choosing and highlighting some things that curators might deem unimportant and discarding others that are culturally more significant. The argument for it is that this is a different truth but an equally valuable one.

I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you seem to be arguing that it is more important that the ultimate responsibility of the Chief Archivist for the documents is preserved than it is for that responsibility to be exercised to change the way the documents are displayed at the National Library. It is good to learn that the documents in question are still the responsibility of ArNZ though, as we both agree, there is precious little evidence of this in the online display. If any group in our two communities has a need to hear the r/keeping message I would say it is secondary school pupils, bombarded with factoids, disconnected twitter rants, unreliable and unverified opinions masked as news and encouraged (by some) to express their thoughts w/o fact checking. Learning how to think (not just what to think) and how to evaluate and verify opinions should lie at the heart of the educative ;process. Recordkeeping plays an important part in that.

There is no reason why librarians and curators cannot understand this (the importance of r/keeping) and act upon it. In my experience many do but many more don't and it is something the GLAM-orous amongst us don't seem to care much about. If there is an argument for not moving the documents across the road it is that the likelihood of going off message is greater - but I do not make that case. I am not saying that the glamorous message should be eschewed, simply that a nuanced message weaving together the many strands would look different to what is now online. The real difficulty is how to balance and weave together the different strands into a single coherent theme and that is impossible if the message is unbalanced to begin with. You say the physical display is more satisfactory. I hope it may be so.

As I tried to indicate in my posting, I'm not saying this was done well in the Treaty Room - at least not in my time with ArNZ.

2017, July 3: <<Gianni di Gravio:...yes they are still records...Problem is that the other sectors of our GLAM family aren't always aware of what archivists are or do. At our last GLAM Peak meeting in Melbourne one of the presenters incorrectly stated that GLAM stood for "Galleries, Libraries, And Museums!...the fact [is] that we,,,have largely kept to ourselves...trying to understand what it is to be an archivist, and how we differentiate ourselves from librarians. You are right to say that archivists have allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by GLAM, but...there are some of us working actively to put our views on the world back into the GLAM mix...The one fundamental reason for forming the Australian Society of Archivists (according to the interviews with the original ASA pioneers), was in order to differentiate the 'work' of archivists from that of librarians...We now should well and truly know who we are, what we do, and how to do it. Now is it time to rejoin our colleagues across the GLAM sector and help them out, get into the thick of it, and share our light, as many are struggling with understanding the context of their collections and how to portray them digitally. There is a great metaphorical memory palace being built here, that will help ensure the open and free access of Australia's cultural materials in digital form to everyone everywhere in Australia, no matter where they live. To help inspire, educate, and most importantly, survive into the future...The biggest chunk representing over 200 million items lies within the public records. Arguably everything pretty much. Yet "the stuff" is across a myriad of institutions and individuals grappling at how best to deal with them. Archives...are raining like confetti...How people make sense of this, is where archivists can really help. We can help them identify where it came from, how best to describe it, conserve, give it its intellectual shape. But we have to be there, in the thick of it to help...>> There are two possibilities raised by your argument :

- Archivist/recordkeepers should go deeper into the world of GLAM and make THEM "understand" and try to "differentiate ourselves", conceding that we are GLAM-orous but a different subspecies, accepting terms of art like "collection", "heritage", and "significance";
- Archivist/recordkeepers could withdraw from GLAM and tell THEM to buzz off because they are not US, that we are a different species altogether, that we don't collect, display, rejoice, or delight, and deploying terms of art like "evidence", "discrimination", and "context".

We had debates like this back in the 1990s. Not saying what the correct position is, not saying that the choice has to be binary, and not denying that most practitioners are trapped inside a paradigm that compels them to be both. Not even denying that a nuanced approach could profitably recognise the GLAM-orous side of our work, provided we get the balance right, but if I were trying to do that it would not be by speaking up within the GLAM community and trying to convince THEM of this right now – if we were as robust as you say we are and had something worthwhile to offer, maybe, but I don't accept that (see below). We don't need their understanding at the moment, we need the understanding of our stakeholders, those we serve (our employers and users) and integrating within GLAM may baffle and confuse our stakeholders rather than assist. If the misconceptions of curators and librarians are hostile to differentiated integration maybe we should rejoice and let them shrivel into mere GLaM. In other words, so far as the cultural side of our work is concerned, we should be differentiating ourselves to users of GLaM-orous resources and trying to get them to understand that WE are not the same as THEM. Insofar as the politics and the funding are concerned, it has always been my view that allowing confusion on this point when dealing with our masters (whatever the short term gains) is bad policy in the long run.

BUT even if we are compelled to operate as an adjunct to GLAM and cannot differentiate ourselves to stakeholders

- This is also about our frame of mind, how we think, what we value, how we behave, in short who we are - and that space cannot be invaded by the GLAM-orous if we don't let them.
- If the decision (insofar as it was ever ours to make) had been to turn our backs on GLAM thirty years ago and to pursue different values and different goals, the captured institutions of today might look very different and might not be trapped inside the GLAM paradigm at all.

The fact is that the real-world situation now of many of the institutions is schizophrenic – portraying themselves as GLAM-orous to one audience and as archivist/recordkeepers to another. Some might see this as an appropriate posture for a profession that adopts the Janus as its emblem. But how do we justify it to our stakeholders? How do we meet questions about whether these institutions should go on exercising dual roles? What support and nourishment does the cultural role afford the r/keeping role and vice versa? What, in short, is the value add in keeping them together?

I think there may be a subtle argument as you suggest for maintaining the connection, involving (in part) the differences in the ways archivists manage and display heritage materials but I don't see us delivering on that and I for one am more than a little overwhelmed by enthusiasms tending towards the deployment of heritage assets we manage in exactly the same way as all of the rest. In fact, some people seem hell bent on eliminating the differences in the way archival resources are deployed, without perhaps realising that this might establish the case for separating the two roles altogether. We aren't teaching them, they are submerging us. We are told that users of archival resources for cultural purposes don't care about evidence, discrimination, and context and at one level this is undoubtedly true of most (but not all) of them in the first instance. Most of them want to get at the stuff and they want to do so quickly using the google-model or various stylish heritage variations of it. So, that is what we have to provide. But I have never heard anything so dumb as the extrapolation that our users therefore don't care about the meaning of the information we provide, that they are too stupid and uncaring to understand and discriminate between a record and other sources of information, and that all we need to do is to keep piling our stuff into the general mix. You seem to agree with my distain.

I think I am the last person who needs persuading that global access to archival resources is needed (in conjunction with GLAM or not) founded on context and structure and deployed on the Internet. I cannot share your optimism that archivists have succeeded in identifying the requirements let alone in establishing robust solutions. My [Modest Proposal](#) sought to start a conversation as to what those requirements might be and a parallel conversation on [digitisation mania](#) is also needed. But I think we are in retreat before universal indiscriminating access solutions and clinging to paper methodologies in a digital age. Integrating an archival solution with access to resources outside the grip of archival institutions (what I call the "ungathered" resources) is one of the requirements I have suggested we need to look at. But we can't offer solutions to the GLAM-orous or invite them to learn from us because we don't yet have the solutions to offer. It is pointless aspiring to give GLAM contextualised solutions that work in the digital space if all we have is on-line versions of tools we developed in the paper age, if we are arrested in that stage of our development, and if we are (rightly) in danger of being submerged ourselves by global access tools developed to meet different aspirations.

2017, July 4: << [Gionni di Gravio](#): Apologies if I gave the impression that I was too optimistic that we had all the answers ... But that's not to say we won't come up with some great solutions in cooperation with others from outside our profession. So, I do advocate us being in the thick of it, with our fellow GLAM people, because archivists have an important role to play towards the GLAM ideal. We do provenance, context, untangling what an 'archive' is as opposed to a 'collection' very well. We're good at understanding evidence, how to test it, how to trust it, how to know the human failings behind it. I think the GLAM organisations need our knowledge and expertise in what we *know* and *do* well, just like we need their help in what they *know*, and *do* well...The rampant digitisation, which is a mess, can be disconcerting, but what is truly exciting is how we are going to make sense of it all. What will be the overarching canvass that will convey context, provenance, depth of understanding to people accessing the digital object...>>

2017, July 5: <<Adrian Cunningham: This is a very important discussion ... It cuts to the heart of the archival mission - are we primarily about preserving and enabling the use of documentary (cultural) heritage or are we primarily about enabling integrity, justice and good governance? Personally, I have never had a problem with these two roles co-existing and complementing each other...Reconciling, acknowledging and explaining these two roles underpinned the development by the ASA in the 1990s of "The Archivist's Mission" statement...The fact that these two roles should not be in competition or conflict with each other, but should support each other, was the key message in Terry Cook's landmark keynote address to the 2000 ASA Conference in Melbourne. It also was the subject of Verne Harris's attack on the records continuum at the ICA Congress in Seville in 2000 when he accused Australian continuum thinkers of abandoning the archival heartland (i.e. documentary heritage)...Chris argues that cleaving to these two roles risks confusing people with mixed messages and a 'weak minded duality'...we can be part of the 'GLAM industry' without losing our separate identity - just as we can part of the open government industry or the integrity in public administration industry without losing our separate identity...we may not always get properly heard - from time to time we may get overwhelmed and our institutions may get swallowed back into libraries [but] that risk does not mean that we should deny the common interests we have with our GLAM partners...None of which is to gainsay ... the dangers associated with putting all our eggs into the basket of indiscriminating universal online access...I have some attachment to the word ["collection"] and have never felt the need to apologise for it...there are many archival programs that do actively collect - and that is an entirely valid pursuit as Chris himself said back in 1996 in his memorable A&M article 'Beating the French'.>> Let us not confuse "collection" as a term of art with the role and purpose of collecting archives. Collecting Archives (e.g. ANU, Melbourne U, the State manuscript libraries, etc.) hold many archival deposits from diverse corporations as well as personal archives. They may be a collection of archives, but they don't have to treat the records they curate as collectables. Some Government archives also hold archival deposits of personal archives which they may or may not justify on the grounds that such personal papers are organically part of the archives of the government they serve. The Government Archives seldom hold the entirety of the government's archival residue. The Commonwealth has always had joint archival authorities (NAA and AWM) and various arrangements exist in most governments for the dispersal of portion of the archives to specialist repositories (sometimes called places of deposit). Such arrangements can operate while recognizing the organic whole of the materials thus dispersed instead of treating the matter as a distribution of collectables.

That is quite different from objecting to "collection" and "collecting" as a way of describing how archivists (including right-thinking manuscript librarians) approach their role and go about their work - what Adrian and others call the archival mission. The archival mission has nothing to do with the mission statement of an organisation. It's the mix of GLAM and r/keeping within the archival mission that has to be considered, not whether the two roles can be conjoined organisationally. If they are two parts of a single mission, what needs to be demonstrated is not that they can be brought together under the umbrella of some convoluted mission statement but how they reinforce and nourish each other - and preferably how they are inextricably linked and cannot, without damage, be separated. Assumptions are being made about what I think. Let me be clear. I believe (I think I may say passionately) that a recordkeeping approach to the management of archival heritage materials is essential and the conjunction should be stoutly defended. It pains me to have to say this because I thought it ran clearly through nearly everything I have said and written over 30 years.

An archivist respects and preserves materials on the basis of structural connections conferred on the materials by the process of formation and use. A collector gathers and deploys material thematically. These approaches may or may not rest on physical co-location or inter-sorting of the materials and need not be mutually exclusive. An archivist may augment archival description by developing or facilitating thematic approaches and we are now discussing (or should be discussing) how far alternative archivally legitimate views of records may, in fact, occupy the space we once thought of as thematic (cf. parallel provenance). The difference is easily demonstrated:

- DEAKIN ARCHIVES A: documents brought together because they relate to Alfred Deakin regardless of origin and use; letters from Alfred are joined to letters by him.

- DEAKIN ARCHIVES B: documents gathered by Alfred Deakin, including letters to him, are treated as a discrete entity and letters from him (unless contained in a letter book) are treated as parts of other archives maintained by their recipients.

The distinction between the state of mind of custodians, their behaviour, their approach, has nothing to do with their assigned role. A doctor in charge of an immigrant detention centre is, first and foremost, a doctor, not a warden. A manuscript librarian is perfectly capable of being a cracking good archivist and there is nothing to prevent a government archivist from falling out of grace and becoming a mere collector (except perhaps a certain preciousness about eschewing the word “collection” from their vocabulary as a reminder of who they are and what they ought to be about). The archival state of mind can operate (or be lost sight of) in the high falutin' realms of government archiving or in the more modest arena of local history.

Adrian celebrates the conjunction of GLAM with recordkeeping. Such a conjunction requires, however, some kind of balancing act which is why I agree with him that this topic should never be regarded as closed. The point of my original posting was not to open a debate on the history and semantics of a word but to ask whether the balance as we have it now, in 2017, is the right one. Gianni takes one view and I take another but we seem to agree, he and I, that there is a problem even if we don't agree on what to do about it. What to do about it involves more than deciding how we relate to GLaM, it is also about theory and method in our own back yard. These are serious issues, difficult to analyse and resolve, but worth the effort I think.

2017, July 7: <<Lise Summers: ...I'm taken back to debates I've had about convergence...looking at the ways in which libraries, archives and museums (including galleries) can be co-located, co-operate or be conjoined ...For better or for worse, we are lumped with libraries and museums, and sporting bodies by the ABS, who look at the recreation side of the coin...It is important to engage with these groups and make archival material and archival knowledge more broadly known and understood. It is also important to understand and make known how our foci, missions and values diverge. I've recently found a very nice book on the topic of how and why libraries and archives differ by Thomas Lidman, and reviewed by Maureen Sullivan in A&M in 2014.>>

2017, July 12: <<Gianni Di Gravio:...The bright side to our interactions in the GLAM space is that there might be scope for greater awareness of what an 'archivist' actually does ... And this is where the parallel discussion about the distinction between a “Collection” and an “Archive” is so important. This is where we need to develop a GLAM thesaurus, to ensure we are speaking the same language, so we can understand one another ... The way I approach it with my GLAM colleagues is that an “archive” is distinguished by a chain of provenance related to original work and their creators, as distinct from “Collections” which have been accumulated from a variety of sources by individuals and organisations. A Collection denotes material accumulated from a number of different sources by an individual or organisation ... An Archive should reflect direct provenance, and denote the work of a creator(s), be it an individual, organisation, government agency etc. So many refer to photographic archives taken by a single photographer as a "Collection", when they should call it a photographic archive. It gets entangled, when you have original archives mixed within collections, and vice versa. This is a discussion, and a sorting out, that has to take place across the GLAM sector. And archivists are sorely needed to help.>>

2017, July 13: Extending an understanding of the archival mission into the realms of GLaM is a worthy goal. I would like to extend an understanding of the archival mission even more broadly than that. But that is not the larger question here, which is – do we ourselves still have a coherent understanding of the archival mission to extend to GLaM or to anyone else?

Is that mission to be found only in the fissure between the realm of the archive and the collection? I have few quibbles with Gianni's formulation of his message for GLaM as stated though I think the archival mission goes (or ought to go) further than that. But my questions remain as before: does there still exist a focused professional grouping subscribing both to Gianni's formulation of the archival message to GLaM combined with a larger understanding of what is fundamental to the archival mission? Or is our understanding of the archival mission disintegrating into a "collections" focus before the GLAM

onslaught? And, by "collections" focus I don't just mean the lack of a proper understanding of structure and context, I also mean an end-of-life preoccupation.

If others are worried about the dilution of their professions, that can't be my concern. It's the possible dilution of mine that I worry about. The potential forces of dissolution go way, way beyond GLAM and we have known about them and debated them for many years – notably in relation to the transition we must make into a digital world. The framework for this debate has been understood for most of that time. It was articulated for us by David Bearman who taught us to distinguish between goals and means – to understand the abiding functional requirements as distinct from the malleable methods needed to achieve them. It's a message that echoes the creed of Lampedusa's Prince in *The Leopard*: "things must change if they are to stay the same".

The question is: do we still fully understand what must change and what must stay the same? I think we've done OK so far as figuring out the implications of digital records-making, but I'm not so sure about GLAM and I'm not so sure about how successful we have been in communicating the archival mission (including both records-making and the records-keeping components) either to GLaM or to the wider world. We have developed original, coherent, and orthodox answers to many of the problems of digital r/making but our approaches to the digitised management of archival heritage resources seems to me to be derivative, pedestrian, and heterodox. Many years ago, collecting archivists were nervous about their place in a r/keeping world - assuming they were condemned to be merely GLAM-orous and this meant they couldn't be r/keepers. As Adrian has reminded us, there was even a session about it at an ASA Conference. My answer to the collecting archivists then hasn't changed: you must find your place within an abiding r/keeping mission.

2018, October 2: Perth 2018 Description - Quo Vadis? Part 4 What really matters?

Alice comes to a fork in the road and is puzzled about what to do. Sitting in a nearby tree is a Cheshire Cat. She asks the cat which road she should take. "Where do you want to go?" asks the cat. "I don't know," Alice says. "Then," replies the cat, "it doesn't matter."

One talks of separation and of models, and of entity/relationship vs multi-level approaches, and of structure and ubiquity – but all of that is about technique. Technique is worthless gymnastics until it is deployed for a purpose. What is our purpose? What is description for? To make good records. Yes. To preserve them. Yes. To make them available. Yes. To make them usable. Yes. To make them interesting and more serviceable. Yes (but more dangerous, that). But all of these are objectives which the techniques are employed to achieve. They still don't tell us what direction to take (where we want to go). They don't tell us what matters.

Above and beyond the technical features of the S/system (whatever they may be) lies a view about what matters. A philosophy of archiving, if you like. It is seldom spoken of (alas) and is (I fear) often lost sight of by some of its practitioners. But the ghost of Ian Maclean speaks of it loud and clear. What matters is recordkeeping. If we are anything, we are recordkeepers – first, last, and always. What does it mean to be a recordkeeper? Well, thanks be to Jenkinson, a lot has been said and written about that and it's a discourse that is still alive and well. Isn't it? (he added nervously).

Nothing in the contemporary descriptive discourse is more distressing than the all but ubiquitous use of the word "collection". That others use it constantly is not surprising because their use of it is supposed to be the thing above all others that marks us and our way of doing things off from them and their way of doing things. Not using it is supposed to signify what it means to be one of us – to be on the side of the S/system. Nowadays I find that we are using it too – all the time. Understanding that collecting doesn't matter is supposed to be the hallmark of our understanding of what does matter. Terminological carelessness is a little thing but, in this case I fear, it goes deeper - that it reflects an ignorance of what matters, that we have forgotten.

Ubiquity also abhors collections. Collections are boundaries that ubiquity seeks to traverse. How odd that recordkeepers seem to have forgotten that. And do not subscribe to the great untruth that collecting can be enforced upon you by circumstances. It doesn't matter what kind of materials you deal with – personal or institutional, private or official, current or non-current. It doesn't matter what kind of employment you are in – library, archives, museum, gallery, or office. Wherever you are and whatever you do, you can still have a recordkeeping frame of mind.

So, what matters is the focus of our descriptive efforts. That, unsurprisingly, is the connections (the relationships) we employ and an understanding of the different purposes we use them for. Clarification of the different purposes of structure, ubiquity, and collection would be a first step to understanding but certainly not the last.

2018, November 27: [Debra](#) asks << In addition to preservation and access - making records available and usable into the future - what is our purpose - do we need a greater purpose - and where would you like us to go? >> It is emphatically not my view that our role is limited to preservation and access. We are recordkeepers and that role extends to both records-making and records-keeping. I don't want us to go anywhere we shouldn't already be and should always have been. Descriptive skills are needed to make records and to keep them. That being so, anyone involved in the making and keeping of records, not just archivists but recordkeepers however designated, must be masters of description.

<<[Andrew Waugh](#): Are you suggesting that the purpose of description is to "make good records" through the inclusion of contextual metadata? >> Yes, but not only (or even mainly) through the inclusion of contextual metadata "in the future". I take an expansive view of "description" and see it as a core recordkeeping activity. In traditional practice, we had the content of the artefact, the conjoined "metadata" (we didn't call it that back then), and the related metadata management systems (registers, indexes, movement) governing the artefact. Conjoined metadata is the file no., initials, etc. embedded on the face of correspondence, for example, or the numbering/titling/dating inscribed on a container (file or docket). When we showed David Bearman a standard issue file cover he was enchanted because he'd never seen one and the protocols for handling the metadata were all laid out. I would include all this, handling the data about the content, under the term "description" and we haven't even got to contextual metadata yet. Sometimes, not always, the name of a department or business unit would be inscribed on a file title (never, in my experience, on a docket) but even this was not full contextualisation (it lacks information about purpose, process, and function, for example) and files often move on from their native creation-source (multiple provenance),

In the old times, contextual metadata came later when the artefact moved out of an environment where knowledge of origin, purpose, and use could be assumed, while it was still in the care of registry clerks, for example - the living finding aids as I once called them. This looks like a life cycle, but conceptually it isn't. In an archives they joined artefacts with other origins. Then an archivist stepped in and set down knowledge of the "missing" contextual data from the source system(s) and other metadata needed to distinguish artefacts from one source from those coming from another OR added descriptive metadata concerning post-formation activity that had never before been [captured](#) as part of the continuing process of records-making. On this view, the archivist is as much a records-maker as the file clerk who opens the file. I will let others, who are more worried about such matters, speculate on the authenticity of post-formation description added to an artefact (in my view, so long as the r/keeper's hand is transparent, anything that aids understanding and use is better than nothing).

In the digital world, the boundaries between separate r/keeping processes are much more porous; records enter a larger context from the word go. Digital r/keeping, therefore, requires "us" to pay more attention to description up front. It now lies at the heart of what we do from the outset. More descriptive metadata must be inscribed onto the record than we were formerly wont to do. The living finding aids have all been made redundant. System administrators move on fast to seek new fields of endeavour. Records are duplicated and moved about within an inter-operative native environment. Systems themselves lack stability in a technical environment of change, updates, upgrades, and migration. To survive, the record itself must now carry with it much more of the descriptive load and that includes a lot of contextual information that we formerly left to

the archival stage. In fact, in the digital world, archiving begins the moment a record is formed and you stay our hand over the delete button (and maybe also if you don't stay your hand supposing that you want a trace of the undocumented transaction to survive).

<<Andrew Waugh: Actually, I like the word collection for what's in an archive. For me, it reminds me that one of the things archivists do is select what is to be preserved as 'the record'. It highlights the role of the archivist as a gatekeeper. Thinking of an archive as a 'collection' means that you are thinking about why the archive exists; what you have, what you don't have but should, and what could be disposed of. ... In short, the word collection highlights that archivists are building the archive for a purpose; archiving is not a neutral act.>> Well, Andrew, it sounds to me like you'd be right at home at the Documenting Australian Society Summit

<<Andrew Waugh: While I wish them well, it's actually the reverse of my view. The summit starts from the question of what information should be kept, and then considers who should be responsible for collecting it. My view is that an archival institution should consider what its mission is, and then work to ensure that its archive is the best possible match to that mission. (Although I think that the summit is addressing an interesting issue; it's essentially a sanity check to make sure that important aspects of Australian society aren't falling through the cracks between institutions.) >>

<<Joanna Sassoon: To me, this is all about how we think ... and the difference between how we transform information into evidence - whether of 'me', 'them' or 'us'. Very unGLAMorous.>> Quite so. Collecting is an archival method, it should not become a mind-set. It is one amongst many different methods towards an abiding r/keeping purpose. That purpose can be achieved in a variety of different ways. It becomes dangerous when it forms the basis for the way we think about r/keeping. because it blocks our minds from other (possibly better) ways. This was the essence of the message in Bearman's *Archival Methods*. If you approach r/keeping with the mind-set of a collector, you will go astray.

I'm reminded of Lincoln's answer to Horace Greeley who accused him of a lack of focus.

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing," as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt. I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution ... If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about Slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save this Union, and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union ...

That is my case. If I could make and keep good records by collecting them, I would and if I could do so by dismantling all collections I would do that, and if I could do so by dismantling some and keeping others that is what I would do. Mistaking method for purpose is the evil thing.

<<Adrian Cunningham: "...I have never seen recordkeeping as an abiding purpose. Just as collecting can be a legitimate means to achieving one or more higher purposes, so is recordkeeping just a means to one or more worthy higher objectives...While defending records may be a worthwhile and important thing to do ,, it s not in and of itself something that would ever motivate me to get out of bed in the morning. So what are the higher purposes that recordkeeping and collecting might help us advance? Social justice. Good, transparent and accountable governance. A healthy democracy. Human rights. A society that can understand, explain and account for itself over time through its documentation. They are all things that get me out of bed in the morning. And if recordkeeping and collecting help us achieve those things then I am all for both of them.>> I am all for a long life, a healthy diet, and an ample daily portion of red meat. Oops! An ample daily portion of red meat and two vegs was once thought to provide a healthy diet but no more (the idea has been sourced to the Depression when it wasn't possible to get much red meat and to a time, my parents' time, when pricing ensured that the portions were smaller anyway). It was once possible to say "I am for both of them" but ideas about nutrition have changed.

- Napoleon's plan for 1812 -
- 3. Conquer Russia
- 2. Capture Smolensk
- 1. Get out of bed

Whether or not r/keeping itself has a "higher" purpose isn't really material. It certainly has uses other than those worthy ones that Adrian nominates and which I imagine wouldn't get him out of bed in the morning - totalitarian oppression and the denial of human rights to name only two. The point is this: are collecting and r/keeping simply two means leading by different paths to the same end (like rent subsidies and public housing are two alternative ways of providing low-rent accommodation for the poor) or is one a means to achieving the other (like getting out of bed is a necessary step towards capturing Smolensk)? You could say that getting out of bed is also a necessary step towards conquering Russia but that hardly puts it on a level with capturing Smolensk.

Of course, a larger view can always be taken (of almost everything). Napoleon got good advice that trying to conquer Russia was a bad idea and if he'd taken it the stars may have aligned differently for him. If SOCIAL JUSTICE or some other high purpose is the reason for r/keeping we still must ask how does collecting fit? If it is a co-equal and equally satisfactory means to the same end (as Adrian suggests) then they are alternatives and you could achieve SOCIAL JUSTICE through collecting without r/keeping (and, please take note Andrew, vice versa). That may be the way that the GLAMorous strive for SOCIAL JUSTICE, but it's not our way.

If we employ collecting, it is because it serves the ends of r/keeping not because it is a satisfactory alternative. So, the undistributed middle term in this syllogism is the answer to a question not yet asked or answered: how do we employ r/keeping to achieve SOCIAL JUSTICE (or whatever higher purpose we have in view) and is that materially different to the ways that others strive for SOCIAL JUSTICE? Even if the GLAMorous are also striving for the same larger purpose through collecting is that path an equally satisfactory one for us or do we follow a different star?

2018, November 28: <<Adrian Cunningham: Chris says 'Whether or not r/keeping itself has a "higher" purpose isn't really material.' I disagree - it is the most material thing we can grapple with in our working lives >> I disagree too – with your interpretation of my words. They were clearly intended (I thought) to say that the “higher” purpose is immaterial to this discussion not that it is immaterial in an existential sense. Why? Because whatever the higher purpose(s) maybe you don't need to stipulate them in what is essentially a discussion about contrasting methods. The distinction between the “lower” purposes of r/keeping and collecting can be debated without reference to the “higher” purposes which I take to be broadly similar for the practitioners of both methods. I think I can stand on over 40 years of my writings as sufficient testimony to my commitment to the proposition that r/keeping must have a purpose and that my devotion to that purpose should not occasion anyone to quit their job (devoted collectors apart, maybe). What I thought this discussion was about is how we (as distinct from others) achieve that purpose - a discussion about r/keeping vs collecting as means to an end.

<< I was not suggesting that recordkeeping and collecting are co-equal and equally satisfactory means to the same end.>> Good-oh. I would go further and say that collecting is an “equally satisfactory means to the same end” if we are talking about a “higher purpose” that r/keepers and collectors share. My argument is that how r/keepers approach that shared end is different from the way collectors do. Perhaps “equally satisfactory” would be over-stating it, though. We might want to explore and contrast different ways in which the two approaches support a similar “higher purpose”. I don't want to launch a further debate but maybe look at evidence vs poetry and different meanings for evidence found in archives and collections. This is more than a cultural debate (in the narrow sense) it also relates to the quality of those 200,000 documents being used so entertainingly in the Banking RC.

<< They are different (and in some cases related) activities which may or may not contribute in different ways to achieving the same end... collecting is only one of many ways in which recordkeeping outcomes may be pursued... >> I agree. Collecting is a perfectly acceptable method for archivists, r/keepers, and others to employ. But when archivists collect they do so with r/keeping goals in mind, essentially evidentiary goals - a term which has a quite specific meaning in our world and relates closely to the methods we employ. Referencing the 200,000 documents, we also need to be aware that our use of “evidence” is not co-extensive with that of lawyers (let alone lay persons and journalists). So ...

<< it is important to grapple with how the two activities inter-relate with and differ from each other >> Yes. Where I come down is this: as Joanna said it is about “how we think” rather than about what we do or where we work. You can work in a collection and think like a recordkeeper and (regrettably and all too frequently) you can work in an archives and think like a collector. The forthcoming Summit (if its propaganda is to be believed) is focussed on collections but it is tendentiously titled *Documenting Australian Society*. As I said in an earlier post, r/keepers should approach that topic from a completely different frame of reference.

2018, October 24: Documenting Australian Society

UNESCO Australia Memory of the World Committee [announces](#) a Summit. The [AMWC web site](#) lists the composition of the Committee and sets out its mandate –

- develop the [Australian Memory of the World Register](#)
- propose nominations to the [Memory of the World International Register](#)
- promote the Program through publications and presentations
- encourage and seek government and private sector sponsorship for specific projects and activities
- participate in selected heritage activities and be an advocate for the documentary heritage sector.

Presumably this initiative is a “selected heritage activity”.

The background paper asks (p.2) “What is the problem...?” Good question. It appears that the focus is on a lack of co-ordination in the collection and preservation of and access to documentary heritage and documentary heritage is defined as documents of significant and enduring value. What about documents of vital immediate concern that have no lasting and enduring value? All this translates into a concern with the activities of collecting bodies (given a wide definition). Apart from a detour into the process of appraisal, there are only one or two (possibly ambiguous) references to “documentation strategies” (p.2):

Are there time periods, issues, communities, minorities and phenomena which urgently need targeted documentation strategies? (p.2) ... If a specific issue remains unrecorded, a community undocumented or a nationally significant individual’s recollections not captured, downstream processes like digitisation and metadata tagging are irrelevant ...

but the term is not included in the scope and definitions section (p.3). The ordinary meaning of “documentation strategy” extends to gaps in the formation process but the whole tenor of this document suggests that the intended meaning is gaps in the collection process of what is already formed. In short, the “problem” is how to improve and co-ordinate the gathering of resources not their formation. The focus is on institutions and processes involved in the formation of collections rather than the formation of documentary heritage in the larger sense, much less on the place of documentation in Australian life. If that’s the way you frame the problem, then that determines the kind of solution you’ll come to. If that is a misreading, then it is certainly one that fits with the language used and it is one that needs much re-drafting to clarify:

... a wide range of organisations, institutions and initiatives that are committed to enabling the long-term preservation of and access to (p.3) ... a multiplicity of institutions, initiatives and programs (p.4) ... the collective stock of documentary heritage is preserved and added to primarily by publicly-funded, university, community and other libraries, archives and related institutions. Material of unknown quantity and significance is also held in private hands, including in company and organisational archives that may or may not provide public access (p.4) ... Complementing [them] are over three thousand local library and local museum collections, historical societies, halls of fame, mechanics institutes, oral history groups, heritage centres, universities’ archives and special collections, pioneer associations and keeping places (pp.4-5) ... *Significance 2.0* ... is an important and useful tool for assessing the value and utility of existing documentary holdings and potential future additions to the distributed national collection (pp.5-7) ...

All of which colours the very first of the major issues (p.7) viz. “... what must be documented, identifying high-risk areas that need attention, setting priorities and who to involve/engage in the process?” Very good question.

I think the prior question is identifying the mind-set that went into the drafting of this document and attempting to suppress it in the discussions that ensue. Collecting may be part of documenting Australian society but it certainly isn't all that's involved. Not by a long chalk. How is Australian society documented? By whom? By what means? How do we identify what exists and gaps in the formation process? How do we fill gaps in the formation process? How is documentation that exists made accessible (irrespective of whether or not it's been gathered)? What ought to be accessible, on what basis, under what principles? How do we keep that knowledge, about the knowledge, up-to-date and accessible?

Don't assume that collecting is an answer to anything of any great importance. If "collecting" is the answer, what was the question again?

2020, August 13: News from WA

<<[Joanna Sassoon](#): ... Take care not to choke on your weeties with the [latest cultural news](#) from the edge of empire. For some, this begs the question whether this is the light at the end of the tunnel, or the train coming straight at you?>>

Colin Walker wants to transform the historic institution into a broadcast media organisation, drawing in visitors looking for the perfect backdrop for their selfies ... Mr Walker has plans to turn the gallery into a "broadcast sort of media company that also has a venue". "I want to bring a sense of theatricality," he told [ABC Radio Perth](#)

Many, many years ago, when I was Keeper of Public Records in Victoria, we staged our first ever Open Day. Good turnout, but mostly people who already knew about us. We angled for media coverage and got some print media spots and one TV news team. I escorted the TV reporter and her camera and sound guys around the premises and down into our repository, showing off stuff I thought might be interesting for their audience. As we proceeded, the camera and the sound equipment sagged and the reporter's eyes took on a glazed and faraway look. When they left, I asked what we could do better to engage their interest. She looked at me and said (a bit sheepishly) – "Well, you see, you don't have anything that moves. On TV you gotta have action." Bring on the dancing archives.

Using records as a backdrop for selfies? Didn't think of that one.

2020, August 17: Covering up with archives

<<[Joanna Sassoon](#): ... I'm interested in knowing if other archives have also been party to creating face-masks bearing their collections, [as the State Library of NSW has done.](#)>>

<<[Michael Piggott](#): ... First, virtual jigsaws; now face masks as billboards. Clever of the SLNSW, eh? Promote items from the collection (presumably with all the relevant metadata), generate revenue to "lessen the burden on the taxpayer", contribute to public health, etc. Now, thinking of Chris' post earlier today, if only the State Archives were part of Sydney Living Museums ... although, seriously, can anyone outdo the War Memorial for task and ingenuity? In the 1920s it sold German helmets repurposed as pot stands and coal buckets; and today, well, [judge for yourself](#) ... >>

2020, August 18: No one I imagine would want to argue that archives should not have public programmes – that we should shrink demurely out of the limelight. No. Promoting our mission in the public mind and for the attention of the funding authorities is more than a pleasure, it is a duty. It is the only way to survive and prosper. But promoting archives as what? That is the issue. It gets back to the difficulties arising from the dual-purpose nature of the mission we have shaped for ourselves. Let us call them [glamour](#) and [order](#), not forgetting that a devotion to [access](#) can infuse both – as an attack of emotion (glamour) or a means of approach (order).

After a lifetime spent trying (and failing) to do it, I have concluded that the duality is an impossible sell. Either one or the other prevails or (what may be worse) the message becomes confused. We are what we say we are and that, ultimately, is what we become. If people think you're glamorous, they simply won't take you seriously as an instrument of order. If people accept that order is your mission, they will accuse you (as we have recently observed) of neglecting the collection and failing to inspire the citizenry with its rich heritage. And that is taking an optimistic view that the forces involved in shaping (or misshaping) our future will even understand the true nature of the alternatives. The failure does not lie in

our inability to craft a dual message but in the unlikelihood that the public and obtuse politicians will respond to it in an enduring or nurturing way.

Michael's examples of the triviality to which glamour can descend remind me of the attempt, when I was Keeper there, to subsume PROV within "Archival Heritage". The same thing was tried when I was in NZ. "To lose one archives to heritage, Mr Hurley, may be regarded as a misfortune," John Cross quipped, "but to lose two looks like carelessness." In Melbourne in those days, trams were decorated out periodically with themes (maybe they still are) and an archives-themed tram was amongst the initiatives proposed by the team of no-hopers brought in to advance this nonsense. I was able to strike a small blow for order when showing my hapless successor as Keeper some of our treasures and she asked me diffidently if it was permitted to touch them. I was rewarded with the look of terror that leapt into her eye when I replied, "the Keeper can do anything."

I really must stop all this senile reminiscence. It must be boring the pants off people.

<<**Michael Piggott:** Interesting framework, and prompts the question to what degree is the jurisdictional context relevant to the tensions within the dual purpose mission. In the public sector, there are numerous publics/audiences and Chris' obtuse politicians in play. But in other contexts? Take higher education bodies (e.g. the University of Melbourne - a body established by statute and subject to relevant laws and technically the PROV - has a separate Records Services program, a collecting archives which also has custody of the university's historical archives, and a GLAM "cultural collections" program)? Glamour, order and a primary intent for access (academic research). Or Westpac Bank, where there is a separate corporate archives within historical services? Glamour and a different primary intent for access (research for business needs). And for both, their separate glamour agendas are probably different from those expected of public records offices too. >>

2020, August 19: <<**Peter Crush:**...A clearly identified (preferably distinctive) Archive building (or space within another) in a prominent place enjoying large numbers of passing pedestrian traffic enters the common psyche where it can be compared as a separate entity with the Library, the Museum, the Art Gallery. These separate entities beg the question, "What are the differences between them?" I suggest few members of the public ask themselves that question...Once the member of the public enters the Archive it is up to the Archivist to dispel any confusion...Promoting the Archivist's mission becomes increasingly difficult when one or more of the library, museum or art gallery functions is combined with the archival...>>

2020, November 5: What would you do if you were independently wealthy?

<<**Andrew Waugh:** Note that her collection has been digitised by the Internet Archive and is available online>>

2020, November 7: Collections are often catalogued, sorted, and objectively maintained.

... There are those who have surpassed healthy collecting behavior and can be considered hoarders. Mere collecting can cross into the realm of hoarding when it also becomes pathological ... The differences between collecting and hoarding are apparent: Items in a collection are neatly organized, maintained, and presented or manipulated with ease ... Collections are often catalogued, sorted, and objectively maintained like books in a library. Hoarding behavior is the opposite. Items with no value or clear utility are piled in stacks with neither order nor reason. Steven W. Anderson, a neurologist specializing in hoarding behavior, posits that the need to collect stems from the basic drive to collect basic supplies such as food ... Anderson has found that many compulsive hoarders with brain injuries have suffered damage to a region of their brain responsible for the regulation of cognitive behaviors such as decision making, information processing, and organizing behavior— the prefrontal cortex. Those with brain injuries who did not display hoarding behavior possessed no damage to their frontal cortex, but showed damage distributed throughout the right and left hemispheres of their brain.

Good to know.

2020, November 12: A Christie's sale of "Nasa photos" reported in The Guardian does not, despite the headline, appear to be a sale of Nasa archives. It is, instead, the hoard of a private collector gathered from many sources – including (interestingly) some of the astronauts themselves. What then is being sold: the artefact, the image (one copy of it), the copyright, or the archive (collection)? I'd say it's the

archive (i.e. the collection made by M. Martin-Malburet) that is being sold off but by the sound of it, it's going to be sold piece-meal. So, the archive is being broken up and sold off as single images (copies of them). In some cases, one supposes, these will be the only extant copies of the image involved. In any case, their potential for display "in various guises" is being diminished.

... the collection of 2,400 vintage images across 700 lots [is] featured on the Christie's of London website ... Bidding starts at £100 (about \$132) for many of the photographs in [the auction](#) Christie's estimates that some of the better-known images will reach in excess of £50,000 (\$66,000) individually. "The collection is the most comprehensive private collection of Nasa photographs ever presented at auction, and spans every visual milestone of the space program, from the early days of Mercury, the technical advances of Gemini and lunar orbiter, to the triumphs of Apollo," Christie's said [in a press release](#) promoting the sale ...

Voyage to Another World: the Victor Martin-Malburet Photograph Collection is a chronological journey of humankind's achievements in space beginning with the [early days of rocketry](#) in the 1940s to the first color photograph of Earth and the moon together in the [same still image](#), taken from the Voyager 1 space probe in 1977. Amassed by Martin-Malburet, a 39-year-old Frenchman who has been hoarding space images from his teen years when he had dreams of becoming an astronaut, parts of the collection have been displayed in various guises over the years ...

While the smaller number of landmark photographs are familiar to space enthusiasts, the vast majority of the collection is being seen publicly for the first time, having been hidden in archives for decades and viewed previously only by researchers at Nasa's Johnson space center in Houston, Texas, or the Russian space agency Roscosmos ... Martin-Malburet, whose father was a prominent collector of 20th-century avant garde art in Paris, acquired his space collection from auctions, private collectors and dealers, and some directly from the astronauts themselves ...

Once a collection is formed, legalities aside, what is the professional view of its being broken-up? Is it an appraisal issue? Is the break-up of a "significant" collection more heinous than one of little intrinsic value. Who decides the value? More profoundly, for appraisal generally, is "value" relative? I remember some torrid debates with Victorian train buffs about railway records.

Just to add another twist to the theme of archival "collections" and to hark back to earlier threads on this List concerning the fate of the Fairfax Photos, a month ago [The NZ Herald](#) had a curious report about memorabilia relating (no surprises here) to the All Blacks-

An [online auction](#) is underway selling rare New Zealand rugby pictures that were once thought lost forever. Two hundred pictures from the archives of Fairfax's New Zealand papers are being sold by the collection's American owner. In 2013, an American company which was digitising the collection went into receivership and the photos were eventually sold to a California art dealer, Daniel Miller. Miller bought the entire collection of vintage photographs with the goal of repatriating them to New Zealand. The head of art at Webb's Auction House, Charles Ninow, said the collection could sell for more than \$100,000. "It's anybody's guess but I anticipate this collection will sell for over \$100,000." ...

I thought it was Miller who had acquired the images of Fairfax Australia. Are there two lots? Anyway, the link to the online auction leads you to a page on Webb's Online Auction Portal where the sale referred to is described as "The Fairfax Archives: New Zealand Rugby 1920-1949" auction now CLOSED. As so often with art tradesmen, there is little about provenance and one could understand a NZ news outlet seizing on the local connection and forming a view that it was Fairfax NZ rather than Fairfax Australia that was the source. But maybe there really are two lots. I couldn't find any helpful links to find out more.

One assumes, however, that what is being auctioned are copies. References to "the entire collection of vintage photographs [selling] for more than \$100,000" just add to the confusion, however.

2021, January 2: Form vs function

Resonating with echoes of other contestations – place vs purpose, evidence vs evocation, show vs safekeeping, access vs analysis, culture vs commercialism, etc. etc. – is the [debate](#) over development of the NSW State Library:

Plans to build a small bar on the roof of the heritage-listed Mitchell building at the State Library has been revived by the Berejiklian government in a bid to lure more visitors to the historic site ... \$12.3 million was set aside for Australia's oldest library, which will include a "small function venue" accessible from the

Domain ... The government faced harsh criticism in early 2019 from heritage and architecture experts over plans to build a restaurant and function space over the iconic Mitchell reading room ... a development application for the small bar proposal [states] "... This proposal does not affect the heritage fabric of the building, nor interfere with the sandstone façade ... The small bar is "part of a strategy for the library to increase the engagement with the community, increase visitations to the library, stimulate the local economy and to maximise the potential of this unique, picturesque location". Plans include a \$500,000 renovation to the roof of the Mitchell building. The rooftop section was added in the 1960s and initially used as a staff cafeteria and then a staff lunch area until 2017... State Librarian John Vallance said the government's investment would see the library's "Mitchell and Macquarie St buildings accessible to all" A State Library spokesman said: "The funds allocated for the small bar is \$300,000 ... for the fit-out of an existing space. It [the small bar] will be run by the State Library".

Almost all of this article focuses on the building rather than the contents of the building – not on what it is for but on how it can be used for something else. The Library's muted response that their main purpose will benefit from funding that comes with a small concession to commercialisation is almost lost at the tail-end of the article. Is that increase in funding a benefit or a bribe? So far as the building is concerned, what is so wrong with a bit of roof-top commercialisation anyway? One of the things that many Wellingtonians who were not scholars or genealogists knew about NZ National Archives was that the café in the foyer served the city's best coffee. We religiously opened the "Treaty Room" on Waitangi Day (a national holiday) but hardly anyone ever came.

TOXIC ASSETS; PLUNDER, REPATRIATION, and REPLEVIN

How do we manage records that inflame, offend, or lie? Is custody simply the last place of repose or a battlefield for conflicting claims?

[2017, Nov 22: National Archives' 3000 box gift](#) Estrays: looted artefacts or a pious work of salvage?

[2018, May 7: Battles for memory](#) Taboos and toxic assets

[2018, Dec 3: Much ado about toxic assets](#) Recordkeeping vs collecting once more

[2021, Feb 8: More on repatriation](#) Direct action, negotiation, and is Her Majesty out of bounds

2017, November 22: National Archives' 3000 box gift

<<Michael Piggott: The final step in the National Archives gift of captured business archives to Japan occurred yesterday ... How commendable of the National Archives to alienate some of its collection ... It was especially noteworthy that the archives returned originals rather than just copies ... Perhaps other national cultural institutions will emulate the NAA? The National Library might consider returning its 19th century official NSW and Tasmanian documents collected by Sir John Ferguson, and the War Memorial its documents captured from German New Guinea during World War I ... when I was at AWM in the 1980s it/we returned Japanese soldiers' diaries and post office savings books to the Japanese next-of-kin [This] is rich in all sorts of archival issues and questions ...>>

THE FIGHT FOR THE FILES

... Since the laws of war consider captured records spoils of war, the victorious state may use, exploit, or dispose of them according to its own discretion. There is no obligation to repatriate them after the end of armed hostilities. Nonetheless, countries may return captured records to former adversaries as a gesture of normalizing relations ...

Bruce P Montgomery *Captured records* Encyclopedia of Archival Science edited by Duranti & Franks (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp.127-130

Notions of return, repatriation, and gifting do, indeed, raise "all sorts of archival issues and questions", not to mention cans of worms. These issues arise not so much because the ideas are unclear or difficult to grasp but because practice is inconsistent. Possibly because, as some of the literature makes clear, these issues cannot be quarantined from political, social, and diplomatic considerations also. On a broader front, the issues are not dissimilar to the question raised a few days ago by Andrew Waugh regarding who "owns" culturally sensitive records – to say nothing of contested claims over ownership and provenance of other GLAM materials held in museums, galleries, and libraries (viz. Elgin

Marbles). The question of return (replevin) has many aspects to it, beginning with distinctions that should be made, by us at any rate, between -

- The different purposes of an archives (viz. custody) and those of other GLAM bodies (viz. collection).
- The different ideas about “creation” (parallel provenance) that we are coming to recognise as having legitimacy in our world.

The circumstances which result in possession of records created by one party and held by another include –

- Seizure of enemy archives and records in the enemy’s country after the defeat of that country (sometimes from formed archival holdings, sometimes from r/making sources; seizure of property vs seizure of heritage).
- Seizure of records and archives belonging to aliens operating in one’s own country during wartime or in any other circumstances (usually from r/making sources).
- Acquisition/appropriation in circumstances that fall outside the laws and protocols governing international conflict (or pre-dating them) e.g. illegal wars such as Iraq 2 – cf. Cox below.
- Allocation/division of records of a colonial administration post-independence (e.g. the Mau Mau records). Here in Australia, what is the proper home for 19th century naturalisation records? Where do the records of the pre-separation Districts then part of NSW belong, e.g. Port Phillip District 1836-1851, Moreton Bay Penal Settlement 1824-42, Moreton Bay District 1842-1859, Van Diemen’s Land to 1856 : in Melbourne, Sydney, Hobart, or Brisbane?
- The stage the r/keeping process had reached at the critical moment. The gathered SBV archives are held “on loan” from CBA at PROV but material ungathered at the time of the CBA/SBV merger, supporting on-going business of the merged entity, is still now coming into CBA Archives because there is no mechanism for accessioning it into the gathered archives at PROV.
- Seizure by administrative fiat vs seizure according to law (and the possibility of sustaining that legal basis indefinitely or in the face of conflicting legal claims).
- Uncertain or disputed ownership/control from the outset (e.g. joint operations; the recent Canadian residential schools case judgement).

I leave aside theft and the snapping up of unconsidered trifles (because they are ineffectively guarded from the depredations of collectors or even arguably neglected or abandoned) such as the Ferguson case because true archivists would not, of course, indulge in such unsavoury practices. Issues affecting disposition include –

- Uncertainty over succession (e.g. which of the two Germanies post 1949, if either, should have been given the captured WW2 German archives held by US & Britain?) Who succeeds the WPHC?
- Dissolution or disappearance of the source r/maker-keeper (e.g. archives of the Confederacy, Holy Roman Empire, etc.) In the case of the NAA/Japan handover, the records were apparently created by private concerns and are being handed over to the Japanese government which seemingly had no part in their creation – why?
- Absence of universally recognised principles governing the processes involved (how do we justify the lodgement in Canberra of “Australian constitutional documents” which are, properly speaking, creations of a process for enacting imperial legislation in the Westminster Parliament and seemingly estrays from the British Imperial Archives held in London?)
- Post seizure uses giving new life to seized records (e.g. German records used as evidence at Nuremburg incorporated into a new r/keeping process, arguably making them different or top-numbered records).
- Suspicion over the capacity, intentions and/or bona fides of the party seeking return of the records (viz. British historians fearful, however unreasonably, that the Germans wanted their records back in order to tamper with the historical evidence).

To say nothing of the social, political, emotional, or moral issues involved (refer [Hudson's Bay archives](#) now lodged in Winnipeg). Michael is right; this would make a great conference session. A quick google came up with some useful references –

- James Lowry (ed) [Displaced Archives](#) (Routledge, 2017)
- Douglas Cox [Archives and records in armed Conflict: international law and the current debate over Iraqi records and archives](#) Catholic University Law Review (vol.59, pp.1001-1056)
- Philip P Brower [The U.S. Army's Seizure and Administration of Enemy Records Up To World War II](#) American Archivist 1963 pp.191-207.
- Panel at the German Studies Association, San Diego, California, October 3–6, 2002. Co-sponsored by the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C., and the German Historical Institute, Paris. [The Fight For The Files: Captured German Records After World War II](#)

2018, October 15: Turning over Belgian colonial archives

The [New Times article](#) just posted to Archives Live is part of a wider discourse on “misplaced” post-colonial archives.

... good news landed in Kigali with the announcement that Belgium was ready to turn over archives related to the colonial period, which make up a huge chunk of what is displayed in the Central African Museum located in Tervuren. The Museum is home to many artifacts and documents carted away by missionaries and colonial administrators from Rwanda, Burundi and present day DR Congo, though there is no mention that the other two countries will be part of the deal. The archives have been an insatiable [insatiable!!!] source for researchers and academics and now they will find a fitting home as Rwanda is in the process of building a modern state-of-the-art national archives edifice. What the government now needs to do is strike a similar deal with Germany who were the first colonial administrator after the Berlin Conference that partitioned Africa. Africa has a lot to tell, but it should not do so only after peeking into a former colonial master's cupboard.

The discourse on repatriation of colonial archives is a lively one which raises lots of juicy issues. Here are just a few of them arising out of this reportage.

- What is meant by “archives related to the colonial period”? Should repatriation be based on the informational content (related to ...) or the r/keeping context (formed by ...)? If records from Belgium were now to be joined with similar records from Germany (a possibility raised in the article) would this be a re-formation of estrays into their original order or a continuation of the archival process (always becoming reduced to its most physical manifestation)?
- Why the focus on the Central African Museum at Tervuren? Is that a repository for non-official archives (like the former [Royal Commonwealth Society Library](#) containing, inter alia, deposits of “private papers” from missionaries and colonial officials, and disposed of to a British University when RCS wound up)? Is it more like the [India Office “Library”](#) which contained many (indeed most) of the official archives of the old India Office in London and which (implausibly) ended up with the British Library?
- Do artefacts/documents have to be “carted away” in order to qualify for repatriation? Do they have to have been physically located at one time in the former colony before they can qualify for repatriation? Does this exclude records pertaining to a colony compiled back home at the colonising power's HQ (such as the pre-separation [Port Phillip records](#) at State Records of NSW)? What about records formed in the colony and transmitted to Colonial HQ as part of a contemporaneous r/keeping process (ditto the pre-separation Port Phillip records in NSW)? Even if the process was not contemporaneous, is there any legitimate r/keeping justification for carting them away at the dissolution of the colonial administration (e.g. [Western Pacific High Commission records](#))?
- If so, should such legitimate purposes (if they were legitimate) be revisited after an effluxion of time (ditto the WPHC records)? Should they only be revisited if they weren't legitimate in the first place? Who decides legitimacy? For everything there is a season: a time for carting away and a time for repatriating (?). I have always wondered if the body of records at TNA dealing with [English domains in France](#) were HQ records or “carted away” when the English were booted out (they

seem to be a bit of both); should they now be repatriated, in whole or in part, to the Archives Nationales?

- Why is it OK for the Belgian colonial archives to go to an “edifice” in Rwanda rather than to whatever home might be found for them in Burundi or DR Congo? Why is it OK for the WPHC records to be in Auckland when NZ was never part of WPHC? Should the Belgian colonial archives be split? Do we care about custody, control, or curation? In this case, three former colonies appear to be involved. At what point does such a “collection” acquire an integrity of its own such that evidence of its formation would be violated if division were allowed – five former colonies, ten, fifty?

Oooh, the brain is dazzled by the possibilities.

2018, October 17: Recordkeeping in the news

Privatised Land Titles ([SMH 6 Oct. 2018](#))

The new private operator of NSW's land titles registry surreptitiously hiked some fees by 1900 per cent before it was caught and forced to amend them, Fairfax Media can reveal ... NSW Land Registry Services (LRS) – owned mostly by First State Super and Utilities Trust Australia – reinterpreted the rules and in July started charging a lodgement fee of \$141.60 for every title in a dealing, rather than for every 20 titles ... the government's Registrar-General, Jeremy Cox, intervened in August, ordering LRS to stop applying fees that were not charged before the privatisation ... In the lead-up to the privatisation, surveyors and developers said they [feared the cost](#) of a property transaction would rise. In one recent example, homebuyers and sellers now have to go through a licensed broker to conduct a land titles search. They now have to pay, in some cases, triple the price for the same information ... The Registrar-General is now engaged in a separate fight to keep prices in check. Mr Cox has requested the national e-conveyancing platform PEXA, which is planning a sharemarket float, to cap its prices. PEXA, the country's only online property settlement company, has [threatened legal action](#), saying Mr Cox had moved beyond the scope of his powers to regulate activities other than the lodgement of documents ... Since the privatisation, LRS has shed 20 per cent of its staff ...

Land titles belong to the select group of government functions ((the registration functions) where r/keeping does not simply support an agency's business objectives it **is** the agency's business. Other examples include life data (BDM), valuation, and motor vehicles (licences and vehicle registration). They've always been self-funding and, indeed, a revenue source but turning them into commercial enterprises has public service consequences (it seems) to say nothing of possible impact on their wider community role (sustaining an orderly and reliable social fabric).

Estrays for Sale ([SMH 18 Oct. 2018](#)) – no link

An auction of historic documents was halted on 11 Oct when Vickers & Hoad received a “legal threat” from the State Archives and Records Authority of NSW. “After a comparison of records held in the State Archives Collection there is no doubt that the documents being offered for sale are State Records under the terms of the State Records Act 1998 ... These records therefore also appear to be estrays from the New South Wales Government. NSW Archives require additional time and research to determine if any or all of these items are of archival significance.” Auctioneer, Colin Vickers, said: “It's ridiculous. We had ... to pull them ... much to the disappointment of the vendors, one of which had bought the document some 30 years ago ... at auction ... one of the vendors was hoping the sale would go towards their retirement fund ...”

It is reported that one of the prospective purchasers was Paul Keating. There is a [fact sheet](#) on estrays :

Estrays are records created by a NSW government or public sector organisation which are not under that organisation's control ... The *State Records Act 1998* provides for the recovery of estrays back to official control ... The process for recovering estrays varies according to the significance of the records ... State Records is given powers under the State Records Act to:

- inspect records believed to be estrays
- direct a person not to sell, remove or dispose of an estray
- take action to recover an estray in a court of competent jurisdiction
- direct a person to hand over an estray pending legal proceedings
- make agreements with persons in possession of estrays for the preservation, security and confidentiality of the record

- acquire an estray by purchase, gift or bequest
- act outside NSW for the protection and recovery of estrays.

<<Michael Piggott:...it would be wonderful if the SMH item means that state archives now have the confidence and determination to assert their rights in such matters. Here are two for starters, both items "collected" by Sir John Ferguson held by the National Library, which should be returned.

One is NLA MS 3221, "Order book of the New South Wales Mounted Police, 1832-1841 ". The NLA catalogue entry even adds a note "The 1841-1850 order book is held in N.S.W. Archives (A/5718)" see <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn1271501>

Another is NLA MS 3539, a Tasmanian Supreme Court Minute book, 1835-1839 "of cases tried before Mr Justice Montagu" <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn2794908> and explains why at TAHO there is a gap in series SC32 Minutes of Proceedings in Criminal Cases, where SC32/1/3 ends in Jan 1835 and SC32/1/4 starts in January 1839.

Merely sharing scans of course misses the point. And in another sense, misses great publicity and good will. Of course if libraries started returning estrays or even "estrays", where would it end?>> "Can of worms" would not begin to describe any serious approach to estray-hunting, but (so far as I am aware) that pursuit usually stops at the threshold of another archives, library, gallery or museum. Interestingly, the repatriation of artefacts with cultural sensitivity from museums appears to be an exception. Keep an eye on the Elgin Marbles.

One of the arguments for the *Modest Proposal* is the proposition that it doesn't matter where the stuff is so long as we know about it and where it ought to be. One argument against estray-hunting is that once the stuff acquires a market value it is likely to be better looked after than in the hands of the neglectful government that mislaid it in the first place.

2020, October 2: What a difference a word makes

What makes cultural misappropriation (theft) different to common or garden larceny? Napoleon and Hitler were responsible for the theft or attempted theft of thousands of cultural objects, some of which now reside in museums maintained by the heirs of the plunderers (e.g. [The Louvre](#)). Once the dust has settled, people seems fairly relaxed over leaving stuff pillaged from institutions where it is but less so about artefacts stolen from individuals (viz. [looted Jewish property](#) from WW2). But different attitudes seem to be applied now to artefacts in state-owned institutions (less so in private collections) with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds to the victims. Hence the idea of cultural "repatriation" as distinct from restitution – since many of the objects in dispute cannot be demonstrably shown to have been stolen and in some cases (e.g. Egyptian mummies) restitution of cultural rights rather than property rights is the only coherent basis for action. Activists in France are [on trial](#) for trying to do something about it

Five activists have gone on trial in Paris for trying to remove a funeral staff from France's pre-eminent indigenous art museum as part of a campaign to pressure the government into restituting items they claim were stolen. Emery Mwazulu Diyabanza, 41, led the operation at the Quai Branly museum last June, condemning "the pillage of Africa" ... "We had no intention of stealing this work, but we will continue as long as the injustice of pillaging Africa has not been remedied," Diyabanza told AFP ahead of the trial ... Diyabanza himself sued the French state after his arrest in June, accusing it of "theft and receiving stolen goods" in amassing a huge collection of native artworks beginning in the colonial era. However the presiding judge told the court: "We are here to judge an infringement, not to judge history."

... French officials condemned the stunt, which followed president Emmanuel Macron pledge, shortly after his election in May 2017, to look at the [restitution of African cultural treasures](#). France has since returned a ceremonial sword to Senegal and promised to return 26 dozen works to Benin – including a royal throne – that were seized by French troops in the late 19th century An expert report commissioned by Macron in 2018 counted some 90,000 African works in French museums, but suggested a "circulation" of some works between museums rather than an outright return, saying not all were pillaged or stolen. "Macron has acknowledged the pillaging, but he's the one who decides how many works are returned, and whether or not there should be a property transfer – it's an insult for us," Diyabanza said.

How confusing! There's poor old Macron burbling on about property transfer whereas the activists (no doubt) would say they want to restore cultural rights – not property rights. And what about stuff that was gifted but people now challenge the legitimacy of that. Isn't that an issue with [Strehlow](#)?

The issue of repatriation of archives from colonial powers is lively (especially when the former colonies didn't have the same jurisdictional boundaries as the independent nations that succeeded them. And repatriation isn't new - the [Vatican had to struggle](#) to get its archives back after the Napoleonic Wars.

2020, December 13: A public record or a personal record

<<[Andrew Waugh](#): The Department of Immigration ... took a visa from an immigrant and put it on file. The file is now in the NAA, and the descendents of the immigrant consider it a significant personal object and want it back. (The visa was granted to a German Jewish family in 1940 to travel to Japan, from where they travelled to Australia. The visa, granted by a sympathetic consulate official, enabled part of the family to survive the holocaust.). The [article](#) canvasses the arguments made about custody.>> Whether the visa is a public record or a personal record? From the information given, it appears to be both -

- **In the parallel provenance sense:** the intersection of the office and the person resulting in placement of the artefact within a r/keeping event that would not have occurred without the participation of both parties as creators..
- **In the traditional r/keeping sense:** of belonging (successively) to two series (Michael Margolin's personal archive now subsisting, inter alia, in the passport from which the visa was removed) and then to the official series now held by NAA into which it was placed.

The visa was issued to Margolin much like any certificate (birth, naturalisation, etc.). One would expect that a record-copy was retained by the issuing authority. But in this case, the visa is one of many issued unofficially by Japanese Consul, Chiune Sugihara. It is unlikely that clandestine activities of the Japanese Consulate in Lithuania have generated an extant archive. At some stage, the visa was seized or surrendered and incorporated into another series maintained by Australian authorities and there it remains. We don't seem to know how or why. It might even be the case that the authorities didn't mean to keep it and would have handed it back if asked but we just don't know. If that intention (to hand it back if asked) could be established, there might be an argument for handing it over now so that it could complete its r/keeping journey.

But it seems there is now yet another dimension – the museum dimension. It seems the family doesn't want to restore the personal archive but to make the artefact part of the proposed exhibition. It would not be preserved either as an official record or a personal record but as part of a celebratory display (a collection) gathering diverse materials from diverse sources without reference to honouring a r/keeping purpose surviving from the past. Rather, the artefact would enter a new phase by reference (prospectively) to the formation of the exhibition - a legitimate purpose in its own right but having no relevance to the question posed. An argument might be mounted that the proposed exhibition honouring Sugihara amounts to a restoration of the non-extant archive of unauthorised activity in the Japanese Consulate in Lithuania in 1939 – but that would be a bit thin.

So, it would be wrong to portray the return of the visa as “restoring” the personal archive of Michael Margolin. The purpose of handing it over would be to sunder it from both the series to which it once belonged and re-create it in another dimension – which you may or may not choose to regard as a r/keeping process in its own right. How typical of the museum guy to give over-riding emphasis to originality of the artefact. Good luck to NAA trying to explain context and structure. I didn't find the *Blade Runner* analogy convincing (perhaps because I've not seen the film).

But the discussion does raise interesting issues. In Victoria, I could never come up with convincing arguments why we couldn't hand over records we had decided to destroy to train buffs who wanted them. NAUK had a similar problem with military buffs and tally sticks (if I recall correctly). Should we have the same attachment to originality as museum guys (and some librarians and, alas, even some archivists)? What does originality prove? NAA offered a high-resolution copy to the family. Why shouldn't a high-resolution copy (made in accordance with standards for preserving evidential quality) be retained by NAA instead of the original? With all the digitisation going on, what becomes of the digitised hard copy? Why can't that be destroyed? Not the Domesday Book, perhaps, but everything else. In which case, it's the same issue as the tally sticks. If NAA has a satisfactory evidential scan why do we care

whether some museum gets the original? Our ideas of authenticity don't begin and end with weakening knees as we gaze on an historical artefact. Or do they?

These are questions, by the way, not answers.

2020, December 14: <<[Michael Piggott](#): Requests for the removal and gifting of an item from a file has happened before at NAA and the arguments well-rehearsed ... requests from descendants for the personal file relating to a family member which is destined for destruction need careful handling. But for any government archives confident of its professional authority and expertise, weighing the arguments for and against ... should be pretty straightforward ... Chris' point re *Blade Runner* also highlights the risks in not keeping arguments simple, clear (and free of references to Occam's razor and *Beati possidentes*). As we know, archives themselves alienate records, as NAA did in 2017-18 when [3,300 boxes of originals of captured Japanese Australian businesses were handed](#) to Japan (in fact the National Archives of Japan). Decades ago the War Memorial made a gift of soldiers' postal savings books - the originals, not copies - taken from Japanese prisoners and bodies and kept initially by the Allied Translator Intelligence and Service. Then there was the famous Bob Hawke request for one of the originals of the UK Act which brought the Australian federation into being, ie the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act signed by Queen Victoria. There was considerable argy-bargy and understandable disquiet at the House of Lords Record Office and the then Public Record Office, but eventually, as [Graeme Powell explained](#):

Thatcher relented and, although still concerned about the risk of setting a precedent, the Government introduced an Australian Constitution (Public Record Copy) Bill in the British Parliament. It was passed unanimously. On 23 August 1990 the Foreign Secretary formally presented the document to Hawke, saying that it was 'entirely natural and right that Australia would want to possess its 'birth certificate''. Since 2001 the Constitution Act has been on display in the Federation Gallery in the National Archives of Australia.>>

2018, May 7: Battles for memory

Interesting [story in The Guardian](#) re the portrayal of the Holocaust in Poland.

The Government there has passed a Holocaust speech law apparently which "criminalises the false attribution to the Polish state or nation of complicity in the crimes committed by Nazi Germany during the Holocaust" prompting a "furious reaction" in Israel and elsewhere "amid concerns it could be used to restrict open discussion of Poland's wartime history." As if existing laws outlawing denial, vilification, and the giving of offence aren't already distorting and restricting open discussion of this and many other issues. Now Polish nationalists are attacking the Auschwitz Museum for not upholding the nationalist view.

Galleries, museums, and archives cannot help becoming involved in controversy when their activities touch on controversial matters. Exhibitions, narratives, finding aids, services, representations of all kinds put us in the soup. We can't help but have a view or, at any rate, be seen to have a view. Should we try to be "impartial" (whatever that means) or "objective" (whatever that means) – they're not the same thing. Should we hold a view, participate, take sides? What about when two parties in dispute are using the same archives to uphold disputed claims (e.g. land claims in NZ under the Treaty process)? What is our role then? Should we be active or passive? Should we be shrewd in who we decide to offend? Should we be guided by what is right, what is prudent, what is "correct", or what we are told to do? Do we have a constituency? Is it their mores to which we should subscribe? Is it our job to uphold, to educate, to challenge, or to confront? By reference to what standards can our judgements and actions on any of these ticklish matters be submitted?

The most we can hope for I expect - forlornly I fear - is that debates and disputes in which we become embroiled are relatively free of violence and abuse and from misguided attempts to legislate the truth. Strange we don't have more conference papers about this.

2019, June 28: Toxic assets (again)

Custodians are traditionally preservers of evidence, supposedly indifferent to the way it is used. But how we describe the material, how we present it, how we contextualise it (ultimately whether we decide even to keep it) necessarily involves interpretation and judgement. What limitations of taste and decency constrain us? An article by Peter Beaumont in [The Guardian](#), coming at the matter from a completely different perspective from that of the r/keeper, reaches a position intriguingly aligned to our professional concern with evidence:

Julia le Duc's image of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, lying drowned on a muddy shoreline after an attempted crossing of Rio Grande into the US appears like a summation of all the arguments about the Trump administration's harsh immigration policies ... It is an image ... that ... raises a profound challenge: how should we respond to such horror?

That question was asked best ... by Susan Sontag ... [when] she asked what it meant for images to "protest suffering, as distinct from acknowledging it?" "There is a shame as well as shock in looking at the close up of real horror," Sontag suggested. "Perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it ... or those who could learn from it. "The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be."

... Too often when we contemplate such images of death they are somehow exotic, other; they seem to depict things that happen to people outside our own experiences. None of which is an argument for not looking. Only for looking harder and more purposefully.

... One issue, as a number of those who, like Sontag, have written critically on images of atrocity, is the question of context ... The reality is that, although we know a little of the meaning behind what Le Duc has shown us, we still do not know enough ... to protest and not simply acknowledge what we see in Le Duc's harrowing picture requires that we do not look away; that we demand to know the context and ask the hard questions. That we bear both witness and *know* what we are seeing.

2019, September 2: The power of artefacts

Yet again, an exhibition of "toxic" historical materials is being seen as dangerous and in need of restraint (if not suppression). The latest report pertains to [an exhibition of Nazi design](#) in a Netherlands museum. In all such cases (that I have seen reported), it is the public display and possible dissemination amongst the unwashed that would-be censors want to inhibit rather than the knowledge the objects on display represent. There is presumably nothing in this exhibition that tells us what we don't already know. But the artefacts are deemed to be inflammatory. Or perhaps, as Andrew suggested in an earlier posting about facts and objectivity, it is interpretation or selectivity that is at fault (the suggestion that the museum is "glorifying" the Nazis).

[The exhibition] ... has opened ... to protests and a request for visitors to the museum not to take and share photographs for fear of the exhibits being glorified on social media ... the exhibition has been criticised by the Association of Dutch Anti-fascists, which has called in vain for local authorities to intervene ... The Museum of Design's director, Timo de Rijk, said he was sensitive to the need to avoid glorifying the exhibits and all efforts were being made to treat the issue with sensitivity ... De Rijk said: "I have had no signal that people from the far left or far right are planning to come to the museum, but you never know. From the start we explain that this was a racist ideology and that the party's aim was to establish a racist volk culture. The exhibition has the feel of a documentary." ... De Rijk said he had spoken to the protesters before the opening of the exhibition, which falls on the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Den Bosch from the Nazis. He said: "They are a group of young people from the Communist party, and we had a long conversation. They are concerned that maybe we are glorifying it all. I would not be doing this if I thought we were, but I can understand that they are aware of that kind of evil in history."

The idea that preservation and display of the artefacts of evil is, of itself, a "glorification" of the evil they represent is grotesque. But it is the public display (and resulting exposure amongst the unread) that seems to raise passions in these cases and "glorification" is just a muddle-headed way of expressing ideological disapproval. Does this confirm that the artefacts of evil (or of good, for that matter) are perceived to be more powerful than the knowledge they convey? It is the artefacts of heresy, not just the forbidden books, that inquisitors seek to eradicate. Or, is it rather a case of cultural elitism (forbidden knowledge best kept away from the masses who can't be trusted not to be corrupted by it)? Not unlike classical pornographic texts that were once safely kept in the original Latin and Greek so that only those with an upper class education could read them. When I started working at NLA, the porno was kept in a safe in the Rare Books Department (or so newbies were told - it might have been a hoax). Or is it simply that the anti-Nazis in this case have their own simplistic narrative of Nazi evil that they fear the exhibition might impeach?

In the same vein, steps are being taken to [block access on the Internet to videos of the Christchurch shootings](#). The utilitarian rationale appears to be that nut jobs are being “inspired” by the events depicted. There's reliable reporting that they are; but should the videos be banned for that reason? The nutters' response to the visuals, it is feared, will be more toxic than mere knowledge of what occurred which (as the trial approaches) is being reported in lurid detail. The argument seems to be that urban terrorism is fed by such exposure – that it is a cause rather than a symptom. The same argument is applied to the alleged link between rape and pornography where, once again, it is visual rather than textual representation that draws the sternest objections.

2019, September 9: <<[Andrew Waugh: Voltaire's principle 'I disagree with everything you say, but will defend to the death your right to say it' sounds nice, but I've never noticed that any society ever accepted it. All societies have subjects that are taboo ... Serious taboos are enforced by law, more often by social pressure. If the latter, sometimes this taboo is enforced only on particular groups in society or in particular modes of discourse ... Nazi symbolism is certainly a taboo subject for many ... I think it is quite reasonable to ask why this gallery chose this particular topic for an exhibition at this time and in that place. It's also not necessary to automatically believe the protestations of innocence of the gallery or its staff ...](#)>> Should Voltaire be dismissed because no society has ever accepted it? Are the aspirations of religion and philosophy of no account because, although they may be esteemed by many, they are accepted by few? Is Voltaire still famous because he succumbed to the power of the majority or because he resisted it and gave us ideas with which to struggle against its tyranny? Should we listen to [Locke or Spinoza](#)? German society accepted Nazism but perhaps they could have benefitted from a dash of Voltaire. Understanding why society accepted Nazism and the complexities of that acceptance is a worthwhile and a worthy study. Which brings us to the question of how recordkeepers stand in relation to the society in which they live. Are we slaves to it (good little Nazis when we're asked to be) or do we stand with Voltaire?

<<[The concept of taboo subjects \(to particular groups in society\) explains why the collection of material on certain topics is strongly contested.](#)>> Then the question for us is how to deal with taboo subjects and with those who would contest the validity of what we do. Is there is a qualitative difference between a taboo subject and a record of events and circumstances pertaining to or arising from a taboo subject? Some of us would argue that r/keeping values and purposes stand outside societal norms and objectives, that our dedication to Truth absolves us from engagement with social mores. [I do not subscribe to that.](#) But engagement is a different thing to submission.

The display of heritage materials cannot avoid telling a story. Two stories really. What the materials mean (how they can or even should be understood) and how we struggle with memory (by enforcing taboos or questioning them). As tellers of those tales, we are unavoidably participants in our own societal milieu – prisoners of it, upholders of it, shapers of it, and sometimes insurgents against its taboos. But our participation rests also on something more: our professional values, our mystery – preserving the integrity of the record and the stubborn facts it reveals.

2020, February 5: Toxic assets yet again

Is there a difference between understanding the past and obliterating it? Does preserving the past carry an obligation to explain it? [German courts are wrestling](#) with the legitimacy of preserving and displaying evidence of hatred.

A court in Germany has rejected a case calling for a local church associated with the Protestant firebrand Martin Luther to remove an ancient antisemitic carving from its wall ... A panel of judges at the state's superior court in Naumburg found the image “did not harm Jews' reputation” because it was “embedded” in a wider memorial context ... Announcing Tuesday's ruling, Buchloh said “anyone looking at the relief cannot fail to see the memorial and the information sign the parish put up in 1988” placing it in the proper context ... the importance of the Wittenberg relief is tied to Luther, himself a notorious antisemite, who preached there two centuries later ... The superior court's decision not to order the relief removed can still be appealed against in Germany's highest court, the federal court of justice.

What should happen if the image was found, in fact, to harm Jews' reputation? Should it then be destroyed? Does preserving the image uphold what we abhor or combat it by preserving the evidence?

Do historical assets speak for themselves? On what basis do we, describing and displaying toxic assets, speak for them? What obligations bear on a curator to “explain” toxic assets (the information sign put up in 1988)? According to contemporary mores or objectively (in value-free terms)? Do historians (and archivists) judge Genghis Khan by his values or by ours?

2020, February 24: More toxic assets

Which is worse a [fictional distortion or an authentic artefact](#)? Is censoring the past a distortion or a correction? How can you “remember” what hateful words “led to” without preserving an uncensored record of what was said?

The Auschwitz Memorial [criticised Amazon on Sunday](#), for fictitious depictions of the Holocaust in its TV series *Hunters* and for selling books of Nazi propaganda ... On Friday, the Memorial retweeted a letter from the [Holocaust](#) Educational Trust to Amazon asking that antisemitic children’s books by the Nazi Julius Streicher, who was executed for crimes against humanity, be removed from sale.

“When you decide to make a profit on selling vicious antisemitic Nazi propaganda published without any critical comment or context, you need to remember that those words led not only to the #Holocaust but also many other hate crimes,” the Memorial [tweeted on Sunday](#). In an email, an Amazon spokesman said: “As a bookseller, we are mindful of book censorship throughout history, and we do not take this lightly. We believe that providing access to written speech is important, including books that some may find objectionable.”

... In December, Amazon withdrew from sale products decorated with images of Auschwitz, including Christmas decorations, after the Memorial complained.

The Memorial isn’t asking (it seems) for the toxic assets to be suppressed, but rather that they be critically commented on and contextualised. That said, what words do we actually use to critically comment on and contextualise toxic assets to the satisfaction of those who memorialise the Holocaust or any other Great Crime (or any Great Benevolence for that matter)? Should we try to satisfy them? How do we prevent the portrayal of contextualised assets degenerating into propaganda? Should we welcome the controversy over interpretation itself as a form of contextualisation?

2020, February 26:.... and it seems that the censorious have succeeded.

According to [The Bookseller](#) –

Amazon has stopped selling books by convicted Nazi official Julius Streicher, following calls from the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) to remove the material. *Der Giftpilz* or *The Poisoned Mushroom*, was originally published in German in 1938 by Streicher HET wrote to Amazon on Friday 21st February asking for an explanation, for the publications to be taken down with immediate effect and has called for a review of Amazon policies to ensure it does not happen again.

Karen Pollock, HET c.e.o., said: "This book is obscene. It is worrying that distinguished publishers like Amazon would make available products that promote racist or hate speech of any kind, let alone those from the darkest period of European history. We have already raised our concerns about similar issues over the past decade. "As the Holocaust moves from living history to history, our survivors regularly raise the concern that Holocaust denial and antisemitism still persist.

"We urge Amazon to do the right thing and remove this material from sale immediately, audit what else it may be on sale, and review their policies to prevent this ever happening again." ...

1. If the sale of these materials is outlawed, what are the implications for custodians? What are the rules for its use and display? Should it be preserved at all?
2. Is it the case that trading in the evidence (including preservation, display, and use) is a “promotion” of the views expressed? Is the HET response correct? Should we subscribe to it even if we don’t think it is?
3. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” On a utilitarian level (pace George Santayana) is suppression the best way of preventing it ever happening again?
4. But, of course, HET doesn’t want us to forget the past. Forgetting the past and moving on is a strategy for overcoming grief. But HET doesn’t want that. They want us to remember it in their way.

5. To achieve this, they certainly want to suppress hate speech now but also evidence of it from the past. Instead they want their understanding of the Holocaust to prevail and the documentation that upholds it to survive (presumably).
6. One is constantly surprised by how prescient George Orwell really was.
7. Doesn't it follow that we must avoid gathering and preserving evidence of hate now for the enlightenment of future understanding of our own time? If ideology shapes the past, why not the future?
8. Is it our job to submit to ideology in what we do or to strive to free ourselves from it? If we have the spittle for it.

If you want to be uncouth, you can substitute "party-line" for ideology. A not unrelated story in [The Guardian](#) suggests that climate science in Australia is now being corrupted by the political process. All this exposes the uneasy nexus between recordkeeping (all recordkeeping) and politics.

2018, December 3: Much ado about toxic assets

If anything lies at the heart of the distinction between r/keeping and collection, it is description.

This [story from the ABC](#) is too delicious to overlook:

"Great pictures of Hitler" and a Nazi iron cross book "filled with magnificent photos" — these were the descriptions inside a catalogue spruiking a war memorabilia auction that sold dozens of Nazi Germany artefacts near Canberra on Saturday. Opinion was fiercely divided on Facebook ... "Only a certain type of person would be proud to own a portrait of this abomination of humanity, or anything... that relates to it," one comment read. Another person called for Third Reich items to be destroyed, for "glorifying an evil regime that poisoned many with its ideology". But others rejected that outrage, saying the existence of the memorabilia "does not glorify it, but rather brings a tactile realism that words in a book never can". "They must be preserved for the same reason we preserve any and all historical artefacts, regardless of their symbolism," another said. Some agreed the artefacts should be preserved, but not profited from, instead suggesting they be donated to the Australian War Memorial ... [Auctioneer, David Smith] said he would review the language of future catalogues ... In October, a Melbourne auction house [withdrew Nazi artefacts from an upcoming sale](#) after a Jewish anti-bigotry activist said the objects crossed "so many red lines" ... The new policy matches that of major auction house Sotheby's, which had a worldwide ban of the sale of Nazi memorabilia. Online platforms have moved in a similar direction, with eBay [reportedly](#) permitting "items of historical significance" as listings, such as Nazi currency and stamps, but having banned Nazi propaganda, parts of military uniforms or other items bearing the Nazi symbol. The [BBC reported](#) Facebook had also removed promotions for the sale of Nazi goods from their site on several occasions — though they remained for sale on many Facebook pages.

So, what is the problem? Is it the very existence of these things and their preservation instead of their destruction? Is it their trade and "collection" by anyone at all? Or would it be all right for a "respectable" institution such as AWM to acquire them but not for you and me? If not, why not? Is it the description and promotion of the items for sale (including words like "magnificent" and "great pictures" that's the difficulty? Would the problem go away if they were described differently (for at least some of those outraged and offended)? In short, is this a story about

- What we do with them?
- Who it is who does something with them?
- How we describe and present them?
- The political fall –out of dealing with toxic materials?
- The kind of materials involved (stamps yes, uniforms no)?

Probably the difficulty lies in all of these and some more besides.

In a purist sense, these are not records. But we are moving away from a purely transactional view of records-making and these materials (some would say) could be treated as records, if properly contextualised. I have for some years been using the phrase "evidence of event or circumstance" to reflect that broader understanding but no one has ever taken me up on it. Given that, for the sake of argument, would a r/keeper be any better placed than a collector in dealing with these dilemmas? Is treatment of a record different from treatment of an "historical artefact"? The r/keeping concepts of whole-

ness and completeness would be one point of differentiation that might be helpful. So might our ideas on structuration which would value the assets in relation to other things rather than by any inherent quality they were deemed to have. The r/keeping values of accuracy, authenticity, and impartiality might also help by focussing on referential rather than intrinsic integrity.

2018, December 4: <<[John Machin](#):...it is important that archives preserve this sort of thing to afford the future an opportunity (and only an opportunity...) to avoid history as fake news prevailing...It isn't so much the intent on the keeper as the intent of those accessing. It isn't available to the keeper to know whether the purpose of access is veneration or education (for example). I am suspicious of the wholeness criterion too. How big (how deep perhaps?) is the record-keeping whole? In saying "this is it" are keepers enforcing an orthodoxy or boundary that is as potentially toxic as eponymous assets in this thread?>>

<< not sure it is easy to get into the record-keeping intent though >> A r/keeping approach to this kind of material would need to get beyond customary ideas about creation within a transaction. Societal provenance, for example, must confer similar properties but in a different way; if societal provenance is truly provenance then it must "create" the context in which the material is to be preserved and understood. So we would portray these objects as the "creation" of the social context in which they came into being, just as we portray transactional records as the creation of the hand of the records-maker. If you accept the possibility that transactional records may be the accidental result of a process (rather than a purposeful one) it's not much of a leap to trace a connection between social activity and the formation of records.

<<I am suspicious of the wholeness criterion...are keepers enforcing an orthodoxy or boundary...>> Yes. But all description does that. Enforcing a boundary or "orthodox" view is the point of description (that's the way we do it). It is how we preserve the r/keeping quality of the materials (their meaning) - by insisting the structure and context of the records in hand are this rather than that. by enforcing it onto the notice of others. We must take that brave step while adhering to our values of impartiality, authenticity, and accuracy. You're right to be suspicious - we must all be, and a bit humble as well - but we mustn't lose our nerve. Ultimately, these boundaries, these "orthodoxies", must be contestable, nuanced, qualified, ambiguous, but they still can't be advanced tentatively. My answer to that problem is [parallel provenance](#).

2018, 5 December: <<[Andrew Waugh](#): I think that we're talking apples and oranges. Chris seems to be focused on a dichotomy between 'recordkeeping' and 'collecting'. If I understand him correctly, for Chris collecting is selecting individual documents for their perceived value, whereas recordkeeping ensures that the records, the relationships between the records, and the context around the records are captured. When I talk about collecting (and collection), I'm talking about the appraisal decisions...we have the perfectly good word 'appraisal' to describe these decisions...I like 'collecting' because it makes explicit that the purpose of 'collecting' is to build a 'collection'. And this leads immediately to the questions: "a collection of what?" and "what is the purpose of the collection?" and "who will use the collection and why?" A consideration of these questions leads immediately to Adrian's questions about the social value of recordkeeping/archiving...To sum up: I think the key difference between Chris' position and mine is the scope of what we are collecting. Chris seems to be focussed on collecting documents, whereas I am interested in collecting fonds and series (and, perhaps, not collecting particular items)...I should consider collecting in the continuum. It's clear that participants at all stages are focused on building and managing a collection that supports one or more purposes...Archivists are definitely interested in culling the collection, but also interested in memory.>>

<< Archivists are definitely interested in culling ... but also interested in memory >> When I was in NZ they adopted the slogan "Preserving the nation's memory" (or something like that). I suggested that in light of our retention rates, as appraisers and collectors, a more appropriate slogan would be "purgers of the nation's memory" but it didn't take.

<< I think that we're talking apples and oranges. Chris seems to be focused on a dichotomy between 'recordkeeping' and 'collecting' >> I am focussed on a dichotomy because I believe there is one. I am using those two terms as totems standing for what I perceive to be two different mind-sets which can be discussed as to their substance regardless of the labels we use. I'm not interested in semantics. I don't

care what names they're called by – apples and oranges suit me just fine but I don't think that's what you meant. My original objection to the term "collection" as one that r/keepers ought not use was that it betokened a loss of understanding of what we do and why we do it. I would happily substitute the term "fruit cellar" for "collection" if we could thereby recover a proper understanding of our mission. You are seeking to eliminate the differences between two concepts by focussing on different applications (appraisal vs something else, items vs Fonds). Couldn't disagree more. Who's focussing on dichotomies now? I want to accentuate the differences between the concepts by focussing on how they operate differently when applied not to different operations but to the same operation, in each and everything we (and they) do – be it appraisal, custody, access, or anything else we both, r/keepers and collectors, undertake.

<<If I understand him correctly, for Chris collecting is selecting individual documents for their perceived value, whereas recordkeeping ensures that the records ... and the context around the records are captured.>> You don't understand me correctly at all. Perceived value is a common goal but the kind of value archivists and collectors see and struggle to reveal is different. As Adrian has said, there must be a purpose behind what we do – r/keeping for r/keeping's sake would be so daft as to be laughable. My point is that r/keepers serve value (as they perceive it) differently to the ways collectors do; perhaps we perceive different value in the same material (larger question that). We don't document structure and context because it is a pleasant way to pass a Sunday afternoon. We do it for a purpose and that is to make and keep records and we make and keep records for a purpose – because it is how we serve those "higher" aims Adrian alluded to. And we believe that the way collectors serve those higher purposes (though their ways have utility which is not the same as the utility of ours) cannot accomplish what we strive to do. I'm being oblique because as soon as you use concrete terms for this stuff people start nit-picking the terminology and obfuscating the concepts. As to method, it should surprise no one to hear that it is in description that I think the contrast (dichotomy, if you like) is most stark.

<<To sum up: I think the key difference between Chris' position and mine is the scope of what we are collecting. Chris seems to be focussed on collecting documents, whereas I am interested in collecting fonds and series (and, perhaps, not collecting particular items)>> Bad summation, Andrew. I have made fun of collecting for what I perceive as a uni-faceted view of material (in what I call Flatland) by way of contrast to a multi-faceted view taken by true r/keepers. I don't mind appealing to my own writings as evidence of my intentions because so few people read my stuff. Anyone who has would know (without the need for me to tell them) that the handling of items is way, way, way down on my list of interests. Down there (how do you laminate a C19th document, for e.g.) little distinguishes the role of a r/keeper and a collector or a curator or an auctioneer, for that matter. Up above (framing material within structure and context) the methods will diverge. So, items interest me very little in themselves or as a focus for this discussion; fonds and series interest me a lot. If you want to sum up my "position" accurately it is that you can collect items most efficiently and usefully so long as you ignore the r/keeping demands of handling series and fonds correctly.

<< ... I should consider collecting in the continuum. It's clear that participants at all stages are focused on building and managing a collection that supports one or more purposes.....>> In this post-script, you are diversifying the meaning(s) of collecting and r/keeping to such a degree that I think we would be better off using the terms apples and oranges. It's the thing that matters, not the word(s) we use to describe it. Once you've pureed the apple you can't squeeze the orange.

PS. I must stop saying "we". So far as I can tell, from the lack of feedback anyway, very few people now agree with my view of r/keeping. And they're getting fewer.

<<Adrian Cunningham: ...Chris argues that labels don't matter, but I beg to differ. What he characterises as 'collecting' is what I would call 'bad collecting'...it is unfair and a distortion of reality to tar all collecting with this broad brush. It impugns the valuable work of a lot of dedicated people...I could point out that there are lots of examples around of bad recordkeeping, but I would never try to argue that because there are examples of bad recordkeeping, that all recordkeeping is therefore bad...There should be room in our world

for both good recordkeeping and good collecting...Let's not indulge of caricatures of reality that divide us into warring camps. We are too small and our work is too important to allow that to happen.>> I'm not sure that "good collecting" and "bad collecting" advances matters a great deal. If by "good collecting" you mean activity that respects r/keeping values and by "bad collecting" you mean activity that doesn't, then I quite agree with your distinction. But I fail to see (in that case) why calling them apples and oranges isn't a better approach than lumping them together as "collecting" and leaving each confused listener to sort out the difference between good and bad. You may forget that I was part of a symposium you organised many years ago in which I argued ("Beating the French") that collectors and archivists could share a common theology – in effect making the same distinction that you have now. Where, in what has been said so far, "very sterile recordkeeping" comes from I can't begin to imagine. Does that mean, Adrian, that we must now expand our vocabulary to include "good r/keeping" and "bad r/keeping" also? The only difference between us, it seems to me, is the labels (not the ideas):

Chris	Adrian
r/keeping	good collecting
collecting	bad collecting

Exactly the same distinctions (if I understand you) would work if the labels were changed:

Chris	Adrian
r/keeping	r/keeping
collecting	collecting

If all collectors of documentary materials applied r/keeping values (good ones, of course, not those nasty sterile ones), there would be no bad collectors and there would be no warring camps and all would be sweetness and light. If bad collectors violate r/keeping values (when dealing with records) then there should be warring camps – otherwise the r/keeping values can't be of very much value to begin with. If they're important, they're worth fighting for. If they aren't worth fighting for, they're not important. If good r/keeping is very sterile, it shouldn't be given respect by me or by anyone else.

I honour << **dedicated people who understand and are committed to doing good collecting** >> but I do so because I would regard them as r/keepers, not as collectors. As I indicated in an earlier post, I am also prepared to honour dedicated (well-meaning) people who don't understand good r/keeping but who are doing their best to serve "higher values" by using bad collecting methods (as you call them). I would simply call them collecting methods. When it comes to ill-feeling, Adrian, I must say that the pejorative terms "good" and "bad" appear to me to be more inflammatory than any language I have used. And I would go even further, as I think I have earlier indicated, and say that there are some materials (quite a lot actually) that are better handled in collecting mode than by using a r/keeping approach. So, to forestall another possible canard (dear me, where do they come from?) I am not trying to subsume all documentary activity within r/keeping.

These distinctions are not really about place they're about how we think and act wherever we are, but if there is anywhere in this country where the subtleties of all this are being played out on a daily basis it is, I imagine, AWM - museum, archives, library, commemoration, you name it, they're it. And, for the most part, doing a darnn good job so far as I can see. And it will be recalled that my original posting from the ASA Conference was a lament that too many archivists are pursuing what Adrian would call bad collecting practices.

2018, December 6: <<John Machin: ...I made what I thought was a consciously naive claim about needing to abandon responsibility for the use of archives that either slipped by or was so naive that it was kindly ignored. I was curious about which it might have been.>> Not quite sure which of your earlier remarks you're referring to. Was it <<It isn't so much the intent on the keeper as the intent of those accessing. It isn't available to the keeper to know whether the purpose of access is veneration or education (for example).>>

There was story the other day about the [new Monash Centre](#) in France failing to draw the numbers predicted. Loads of connections in this story with our thread. To focus on only one. [Propaganda for the Centre](#) describes it thus:

This cutting-edge multimedia centre reveals the Australian Western Front experience through a series of interactive media installations and immersive experiences...The experience is designed so visitors gain a better understanding of the journey of ordinary Australians — told in their own voices through letters, diaries and life-size images — and connect with the places they fought and died. A visit to the Sir John Monash Centre will be a moving experience that leaves a lasting impression.

So the Doers responsible for this Centre (keepers, curators, collectors, librarians, givers-of-delight, archivists, showmen, educators - call them whatever you please) clearly have an intention to push a message onto those accessing the Centre. Whatever else they are they don't seem to want to be neutral (not saying they ought to be). The veneration/education sought in this case doesn't seem to be drawing the numbers predicted by the hype. I think the Doer (keeper, curator, etc.) can't help but have an intention. We can't control the intent "of those accessing", but we sure as gollars can shape and even manipulate it if we choose (and if this story tells us that we can't take ordinary, sensible people too far away from common sense, then that's comforting).

I don't agree that the thread drifted from this issue at all. I have no objection to collecting values and methods adopted by collectors in the service of collections. My objection is to their adoption by archivists dealing with records. I think that difference is material to the question of how the contents of the Monash Centre are presented. Like the AWM, the Centre is multi-disciplinary. Archivists, curators, librarians, etc. will all be involved (I suppose) and one profession cannot expect to prevail. But the result won't be the comfortable blend of professional strengths that some seem to suppose is the inevitable outcome of such collaboration. It is (or should be) the result of fiercely contested "warring" views (to use Adrian's word for it). The result will be a compromise - good, bad, or "it'll do" depending on the strength of the contesting parties and their moral sense of the "higher purpose" that we have spoken of.

2021, February 8: More on repatriation

Another [approach](#)

... If coronavirus had not closed most of Europe's museums, [Mwazulu Diyabanza] would probably be inside one right now, wresting African objects from their displays to highlight what he sees as the mass pillaging of the continent by European colonialists ... As the leader of a pan-African movement called [Yanka Nku](#) (Unity, Dignity and Courage), Diyabanza is on a mission is to recover all works of art and culture taken from Africa to Europe. He calls his method "active diplomacy" ...

Last June, in between French lockdowns, Diyabanza and several others entered the Quai Branly museum in Paris [and] wrenched from its setting a 19th-century African funeral post that belonged to the Bari people of Chad ... A month later, in Marseille, Diyabanza attempted to remove an ivory spear from the Museum of African, Oceanian and Native American Art ... Then, come autumn, he was in the [Netherlands](#) attempting to remove a Congolese statue from the Afrika Museum at Berg en Dal. He was given a two-month suspended sentence and a €250 fine. "The prosecutor had wanted me convicted to discourage others," says Diyabanza over the phone. "But the judge recognised that I was not guilty of 'theft' but of a political act. He opened

"We will be looking at Spain, Germany, Portugal, the Vatican and – yes – the UK," he says. "We will be visiting the British Museum once it reopens. It contains some *chef d'oeuvres* that are very symbolic." On its [website](#), the British Museum admits that some objects in its Africa collections have "difficult histories, including the contested means by which some collections have been acquired, such as through military action"...

Diyabanza has now widened his campaign with the creation of the [FMAS](#), the Front Multicultural Anti Spoliation, or the Multicultural Front against Pillaging. This aims to reunite people across the globe with what he calls their robbed heritage. These include artefacts belonging to Native American tribes, aborigines and indigenous peoples of the Philippines, Indonesia, Peru and elsewhere ... "For the moment, we are concentrating on museums. We are optimistic governments will eventually cooperate. Then we will ask people who have objects in private collections to act with goodwill and return the things that have been

stolen from us. But, eventually, it's not just our artefacts but our land and our riches: the minerals, diamonds and gold; the animals, flora and fauna. And reparations – but that is another campaign.”

Diyabanza is not concerned if his movement leaves many European museums practically empty. He has described the removal of art and cultural objects from Africa between 1880 and 1960 as a “vast operation of theft and pillaging that came just after Africa suffered one of the greatest crimes against humanity: slavery”. He is not opposed to African and other objects being displayed in Europe. But he wants to see them returned first and then they can be lent on their owners' terms ...

There are two issues bearing on recordkeeping –

- Records kept by houses of memory, financial institutions, insurance companies, etc. that bear upon [history of provenance, ownership, and acquisition](#). Very gradually, houses of memory seem to be moving towards a posture of coming clean, but the picture is far from undiluted.
- More particularly, there are your actual looted archives. These are a [sub-set](#) of the story of Nazi, Soviet, and American looting during WW2 (which is mostly about art and artefacts).

Archives and records are now being listed in presentations about [repatriation](#) of cultural materials and, as we know, this is also a [powerful strand](#) in archival thinking now and not just about the status of the records of pre-independence colonial administrations.

2021, 26 March: From [The Guardian](#) another quirky illumination of the [Doctrine of the King's \(or in this case the Queen's\) Two Bodies](#) -

Police have been barred from searching the Queen's private estates for stolen or looted artefacts after ministers granted her a personal exemption from a law that protects the world's cultural property ... an exemption that prevents police from searching Balmoral and Sandringham. A spokesperson for the Queen dismissed any suggestion that stolen or looted artefacts were being held on the monarch's private estates.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), which gave the monarch the special dispensation ... [is] keeping secret a set of emails that may shed light on why the Queen was granted immunity from the law ... the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Act [is] a 2017 law that seeks to prevent the destruction of cultural heritage – such as monuments, archaeological sites, works of art and important books – in future wars.

... Although the law predominantly relates to the preservation and protection of cultural property in war zones, parts of it relate to stolen or looted artefacts that have been trafficked out of those countries. It made the buying or selling of these stolen or looted artefacts a [criminal offence](#) punishable by up to seven years in jail. Police have the power to search premises if it is suspected that they are being used to store illegally obtained artefacts ...

... the exemption applies only to the Queen and her private estates. Police are still allowed to search properties within the [crown estate](#), for example, a huge swathe of land that historically belonged to English monarchs and now belongs to the nation. A significant proportion of its profits are used to fund the monarchy.

The Cultural Property Act is the result of an international push to clamp down on the destruction of cultural heritage during conflicts. In the wake of the destruction of artistic works at the hands of the Nazis during the second world war, the United Nations drew up an international treaty in 1954 to prevent the destruction of cultural heritage in future armed conflicts. It only became part of British law when the UK government [passed the 2017 act](#).

2021, March 28: From the [ABC](#) –

When the Shiva Nataraja — a 16th century bronze statue believed to have been looted from a temple in 1982 and then illegally exported — was returned to the South Indian town of Kallidaikurichi in Tamil Nadu in 2019, thousands turned out to welcome its arrival ... The statue was one of at least eight antiquities ... that Australian museums have repatriated to India since 2014 after conclusive evidence showed they had been removed from their country of origin illegally. All the museums concerned say they were unaware of this at the time of acquisition.

Experts in looted antiquities say the repatriations aren't over, with many more items with similarly dubious provenance, or record of ownership, still remaining in Australia's most high-profile galleries and museums.

According to Jason Felch, an expert on the illicit antiquities trade and the author of the Chasing Aphrodite book and website, the vast majority of antiquities in museums or galleries around the world were originally looted. However, he said there were legal and ethical differences between looting centuries ago and more recently.

"If you buy a piece that was illegally excavated 100 years ago, the thinking goes that you are not actively encouraging criminal behaviour today," he said. "But because there's no black and white line between what's looted 100 years ago and what we did last week, 1970 is the agreed upon cut off. "It's a gentleman's agreement. It doesn't have legal standing, but it has international recognition under a UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] convention." ...

Indian antiquities sleuth Vijay Kumar, who had a hand in gathering evidence for most of the repatriations so far, has a list of 12 pieces still in the National Gallery of Australia (nine items) and Art Gallery of NSW (three items) that he says were looted from India around or after 1970 ... He said he found the attitude of the Australian institutions "very strange"... "They are only returning objects that we can clearly prove from where it was stolen with [photographic] evidence but all the other paperwork is equally fraudulent," he said ...

The ABC sent the NGA, AGSA and AGNSW a series of questions asking how many items in their collections may have been removed from their country of origin illegally, how their provenance projects were going, how many staff were dedicated to provenance research ...

- The Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA) said it did "not believe that any works in its collection were removed from their country of origin illicitly or obtained improperly" and was "not aware of any object with any major provenance concerns". They said they had a full-time staff member working on provenance issues ...
- The Art Gallery of NSW's statement did not address most of the questions put to them ... However, they did say the gallery had an internal provenance committee which reported to the gallery's trustees ...
- The NGA said it "continues to devote significant resources to the ongoing research of works with incomplete provenance and historical issues identified over the last seven years" including a full-time provenance manager while all curators also devoted time each week to provenance issues ...

... In recent years, more and more governments and individual institutions have been attempting to come to terms with the troubling past of their stolen heritage and make restitution. [France is this year planning to restore items stolen from Benin and Senegal during the colonial era](#), [Germany is negotiating to return dozens of antiquities to Nigeria](#) and [the Dutch government last month agreed to repatriate any stolen colonial-era items](#), even those without full provenance records. Mr Kumar said the Australian institutions' approach to problematic provenance had so far resulted in them having to return objects almost every year since 2014 ... "They seem to rather bet that we will not find the proof, and it's a bet they seem to be on the losing side of more often than not," he said ... The next scandal for Australian galleries, he said, likely won't stem from a dubious collector being exposed — it will come from countries like Thailand and Cambodia demanding their items be returned

2021, 5 April: [Looted artefacts: desecration or a "pious work of salvage"?](#)

In November 2013, Nora von Achenbach, curator at the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Hamburg, Germany, examined the catalog for an upcoming auction by the Paris-based dealer Boisgirard-Antonini ... [She] was interested in a pale marble tablet, carved with arabesques, vines and Persian script. Lot 104, an "important epigraphic panel with interlacings from the palace of Mas'ud III," ... dated to the 12th century, from the capital of the Ghaznavid Empire, in what is today Afghanistan ... [The] catalog simply stated that the marble's provenance was "a private French collection." But von Achenbach ... may have been reassured by the lengthy description of the archaeological site where the marble was originally found, the royal palace in Ghazni, where a legal Italian-led excavation broke ground in the 1950s. Moreover, as the catalog noted, three panels from the same site were held by the Brooklyn Museum, San Francisco's Asian Art Museum and the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. Von Achenbach ... sent in a bid, the equivalent of around \$50,000, and won ... von Achenbach invited Stefan Heidemann, an expert on Islamic art ..., to view the panel. Heidemann ... had worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where, as chance would have it, a colleague of his, Martina Rugiadi, wrote her doctoral thesis on the Italian excavation in Ghazni ... Rugiadi told him the Hamburg marble had indeed been stolen from the Afghan government ... Rugiadi had

... emailed Pierre Antonini to warn him around the time of the sale. He replied asking for more information. But the auction house shipped the panel to Hamburg anyway, without informing the museum of the evidence that it was stolen ... The Hamburg museum notified German authorities, but did not pursue legal action against Boisgirard-Antonini; it kept the marble in storage and out of sight. In August 2018, I received an email from Tobias Mörike, a curator of Islamic Art, introducing himself and the marble ... the museum was now planning to exhibit the marble as part of a series called “Looted Art?” — a mea culpa, of sorts — and wanted to return the artifact to the Afghan government ...

Two months later, I stood in central Hamburg in front of the three-story former vocational school that housed the MKG, as it is known by its German initials ... Silke Reuther, the museum’s provenance researcher, led me on a tour of the collection ... Occasionally, she pointed out the little orange tags she had affixed to certain exhibits — much to the irritation of some of her fellow curators — intended as footnotes about how that artifact came to the museum. “The question I ask of every object,” she said, “is, ‘Are you stolen or not?’” ... You might know that a painting was really a Velázquez, say, if you could find its original bill of sale, or that a desk was a genuine antique if it was recorded in a 17th-century will. But in recent decades, provenance research has come to be wielded against the perceived wrongs of the past. Like many professions pushed by a new generation of [activists](#) and [scholars](#), the museum world is coming to grips with thorny issues of power and inequality ... A fierce debate is underway about whether some of these objects should be returned to their former owners or places of origin, in what is [known as “restitution.”](#)

... **In the summer** of 2019, I flew to Kabul to investigate the marbles’ journey. Fighting raged between the government and insurgents; even as American troops withdrew, the violence was getting worse ... One day, I got a call from Ghulam Rajabi, a native of Ghazni who worked on the original Italian dig that excavated the Hamburg marble ... Under the agreement between the Italian mission and the Afghan government, a portion of the excavated antiquities were shipped to the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale in Rome. The remainder, including the Hamburg panel, numbered C3733, belonged to Afghanistan; some were displayed in the new Rawza Museum housed in a 16th-century mausoleum in Ghazni. Other marbles were shipped to Kabul, where they were exhibited in the Islamic gallery at the National Museum of Afghanistan ... Afghanistan had laws to protect its cultural heritage, but they were not well enforced. At the time, a trade in illegally excavated antiquities was carried out openly ... Exporting antiquities required permission from the government, but border controls were lax, and bribery common ... Could these marbles have been legally exported from Afghanistan? Selling cultural property to foreigners was completely forbidden by Afghan law after 1980; before that, exporting antiquities required written permission, which, according to Carla Grissman, who worked with the Kabul Museum and who died in 2011, the government stopped issuing in 1964. “Our main objective was preserving an endangered cultural heritage for future generations,” ... During the war, almost 100 Ghazni marbles, including the Hamburg panel, disappeared from the government’s possession ... As tragic as the looting of the museum was, such illicit excavations were worse in an important sense, because they destroyed the archaeological record ... Shorn of their connection to their sites of discovery, a rich stream of antiquities crossed Afghanistan’s borders ...

Historically, collectors and museums in the West were rarely concerned with — or challenged over — the provenance of antiquities, as long as they were legally bought and sold in their own destination countries. In other words, finders keepers. That began to change after 1970, when a UNESCO treaty against antiquities trafficking made buyers responsible for checking that artifacts were legally exported from their countries of origin ... Norms and national laws changed slowly, spurred by high-profile court cases ... “In a world that is well on its way to becoming one vast quarry,” Susan Sontag wrote in her essay “Melancholy Objects,” “the collector becomes someone engaged in a pious work of salvage.” ... [In] the influential 2008 book “Who Owns Antiquity?” by James Cuno, the president of the Getty Trust, which defends the traditional idea of the encyclopedic museum, [argued] “the museum dedicated to ideas, not ideologies, the museum of international, indeed universal aspirations, and not of nationalist limitations, curious and respectful of the world’s artistic and cultural legacy as common to us all.” ...

For the marbles that were taken from the countryside, the lack of an identifiable former owner makes the question of restitution more difficult. But the Hamburg panel had both a clear legal case for its restitution and someone to return it to ... In October 2019 ... the museum returned the Ghazni panel to the Afghan Embassy ... Mörike, the curator, told me “What the Ghazni case shows is that recent acquisitions are as problematic as historical acquisitions,” ... He questioned why museums needed to acquire new antiquities from the art market at all. “The storehouses of the museums are full. We’re already in possession of millions

of objects.” This view, once heretical, has been gathering currency in mainstream institutions ... In the near future, the Hamburg marble will complete its circular journey by jet aircraft, returning to the National Museum in Kabul. But will it be safe there? The specter of past destruction hangs over Afghanistan’s future. During my trip to Kabul, I walked around the museum with Saifi, the conservator, and he pointed out where the smoke marks had been painted over, the discoloration still visible ... By risking their lives, the museum’s staff members had [managed to preserve](#) many of the most important items from its collection ... The museum continues to depend on international funding and support — a drop in the bucket, it must be said, compared with the amount foreign countries have spent on arms and ammunition here ...

The museum’s archives had burned, making it difficult to know exactly how many objects were missing, but [a project to catalog its holdings](#), assisted by the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, was nearly complete. “You have to bear in mind what happened to this museum,” Alejandro Gallego, the project’s field director, told me. “That the museum is still standing, and that it still has its objects and artifacts — it’s the epitome of resilience.” When Gallego showed visitors around the museum, he would shuttle back and forth among the various donor rooms, trying to link the objects into the familiar story line from Stone Age to Medieval Age. But amid the reconstructed, preserved and restituted artifacts, an alternate narrative would emerge: of cycles of human endeavor in the face of repeated destruction, with the scars of the building and the people themselves as the exhibits. “There’s the story that the museum tells,” he said. “But sometimes the story that the museum doesn’t tell is more interesting.”

To conclude the story of the Hamburg marble, I wanted to go to the spot where the Italians dug it up. Even though the palace site had been destroyed by decades of looting, war and urban encroachment, I thought I could imagine things as they once were ... at the end of my trip to Kabul in June 2019 I went with a photographer and our drivers to a new archaeological dig, at a relatively safe site two hours north of the city ... I was met by Azizudin Wafa, from the Afghan Institute of Archaeology, who was overseeing the excavations ... In 2016, the ... stupa was a crumbling stub poking up amid a mound of detritus, its elaborate patterns of arches nearly worn away. The ... Afghan Cultural Heritage Consulting Organization, in partnership with the Afghan government and with funding from the U.S. State Department, has since begun [a restoration project](#). ... Looking down toward the main valley, we could see two helicopters flying toward the immense American base at Bagram ... The story of the marbles, I realized, had no end; the return of the Hamburg panel meant a new chapter was beginning, one that would be written by Afghans themselves ...

2021, 5 April: One of the reasons I despise “collection” (both the word and the concept) is its exaltation of proprietary rights. *This is our stuff, it’s not your stuff.* You can imagine, therefore, how galling it was for me that “property of the Commonwealth” became the statutory test for the definition of “Commonwealth record”. So, it is with a certain amount of glee that I observe collectors in a spot of bother as they are assailed by disputes over entitlement to possession (both cultural and as to legal title). This comes with what I think of as a degree of archival detachment (tho’ the predatory archivist is not unknown). What moral difference is there, I ask myself, between a collection in Kabul and another in Hamburg, New York, or London? Leaving aside the dubious ethics of the process of collection itself, irrespective of whether it is done parochially or globally, the answer (unless you’re a confirmed culture warrior or overly attached to the significance of place) must be that there is none. Well, maybe Hamburg is a safer location than Kabul. I would not impose this attitude on the rest of the world (even if I could) but it must be ours. Otherwise, our understanding of what the material means (what it is) is sullied by who has it or by ideas about who should have it.

For the archival mind, the place where the stuff is housed is one of its least interesting characteristics and certainly not the most important determinant of its quality or value. As a means of protecting its survival and integrity, safe storage was an historically important tool in our armoury – still is. And that much we have in common with collectors. As Bearman once quipped, “storage is important, someone should do it”. Moreover, location can be a determinant and guarantee of access rights so that counts also. But morally speaking it matters little where the stuff is stored or (I would argue more controversially) by whom so long as the “unbroken chain” is maintained by someone if not physically then virtually or by regulation.

The defence of "encyclopedic" collections by the Getty and others may be more nuanced than it appears so long as they take pains to preserve, document, and display the stuff in its true context (viz. by establishing and maintaining relationships between and within ambience + provenance + structure) – a mammoth task for them and I question whether it is within the capability of the non-archival mind. Context is, of course, just another way of understanding and asserting ownership – our way. A more focused collection, one supposes, would have an easier task so long as it was not distracted by obsessions with [compilation](#) ("the act of collecting information from a variety of places") over [context](#) ("the situation within which something exists or happens, and that can help explain it"). Either way, the ultimate goal (however idealistic) should be to document and display the stuff contextually not simply within but also beyond and across institutional boundaries via a universal gateway that transcends location.

PS To anticipate a threadbare response: yes, some curators, librarians, and even collectors may display a proper understanding of context but when they do they are being archivists and to avoid bickering I would even be happy to abandon that name and adopt some other collective noun for us all ([annalists](#), perhaps, or guardians of memory, maybe even *right-thinking-persons*).

2021, 14 March: Who owns the past?

Not a cultural question after all it seems – it's [all about property](#).

Boris Johnson has used his first interview with a European newspaper since becoming the UK's prime minister to issue a point-blank rejection of the [Parthenon marbles](#) being returned to Greece. Johnson insisted that the sculptures, removed from the monument by Lord Elgin in circumstances that have since spurred [one of the world's most famous cultural rows](#), would remain in Britain because they had been legally acquired ... "the UK government has a firm longstanding position on the sculptures, which is that they were legally acquired by Lord Elgin under the appropriate laws of the time and have been legally owned by the British Museum's trustees since their acquisition." ... Last year, Greece's culture minister, Lina Mendoni, branded Elgin a "serial thief" who used illegal tactics to take the marbles ...

Greece has long argued that reunification of the sculptures, displayed in museums across [Europe](#) but mostly in London, is integral to understanding the artworks in the context of the temple they once embellished ... In a move that some believed might embarrass Britain, France agreed to return to Athens part of the frieze that the Louvre had long regarded as one of the most precious pieces in its possession, in return for the museum being loaned spectacular Greek bronzes that had never been seen before ...

In 1816 the British Museum acquired the sculptures from the then bankrupt Elgin, who, as Britain's ambassador to the Sublime Porte, had ordered them to be torn down from the Parthenon after purportedly receiving a permit from the Ottoman forces occupying Athens at the time. Reacting to Johnson's remarks, the Greek culture minister threw down the gauntlet, saying Athens could provide "the necessary documentary evidence" to prove that the British Museum possessed the sculptures illegally. In written comments she said: "Upon careful review of the statements by prime minister Johnson, it is clear that he has not been properly informed ... of the new historical data regarding Greece's occupation by the Ottomans, which show there was never a legitimate acquisition of the Parthenon sculptures by Lord Elgin, and therefore neither by the British Museum" ...

Once you start giving this kind of stuff back, where do you stop? Slippery slope indeed. What is interesting is that the debates on this and other cases seem (for the casual observer) to take place in a vacuum so far as agreed principles on how to resolve them. Is it property - ownership? Is it moral rights? Is it cultural integrity? Is it restitution of stuff with place or context? Is it bringing together related works? What about all the British literary manuscripts sitting incongruously in US libraries? Is it something else? Has UNESCO or somebody tried to lay down the rules for resolving these kinds of questions?

But consistent rules, consistently applied, would only be the beginning. Even if you decide to give them back, to whom do you return them? In 1816, when allegedly flawed title passed to the British Museum, Greece didn't exist as a juridical entity. Who is it that was robbed by Elgin and who now has the better title? Does today's Greece (arguably the successor to the local Ottoman Administration in Athens in 1816) or modern Turkey (as the successor to the government of the Sultans) have the better

claim? [Historically](#), Athens has been ruled inter alia by the Romans (? an Italian claim), the de la Roche family (? a French claim), and the Catalans (? a Spanish claim).

If the Brits rest their claim in this case on property rights, how will they resist repatriation claims in cases where title is unclear? Do they have a moral claim based on the [neglect of the marbles](#) endangering their very existence from which Elgin's removal supposedly saved them? If collection = preservation, what right do those who were neglecting them have to come back afterwards to claim them back? The craziest comment I've seen is that repatriation is what the [ancient Greeks would have wanted](#) (as if modern Greeks can be shown to be racially and culturally descended from them or, even more spookily, claim to speak for them now).

And what about the argument that anyone who thinks they have a claim should just make do with copies?

Archivists, hung up on originality and authenticity, used to call this [replevin](#). We want the thing itself, not a copy or even compensation. But the recordkeeping goal is somewhat more subtle than mere cultural avarice because it is often our purpose to restore the thing to its proper place (in a series or a fonds, for example). But the concept of "proper place" is not unproblematic – even for us – especially when it comes to broader context.

"...as if modern Greeks can be shown to be racially and culturally descended from them.." A completely racist comment on my part but, *pace* political correctness, justified because it is an issue that is fiercely contested down to the present day. For some people, ethnic origins still seem to be important. As one who claims Irish descent, I can understand this a little (without being passionate about it). Are the residents of Greece and the Greek diaspora descended from the ancients? Some say [yes](#) and some say [no](#). How many Macedonians can fit on the head of a pin? We're all descended from someone, I guess. When Alec Douglas-Home was twitted by Harold Wilson for being the 14th Earl of Home, he replied: "Well, I suppose he must be the 14th Mr Wilson".

Politically, the question may be moot. In AD 212, the Emperor Caracalla (in the [Constitutio Antoniniana](#) in Latin: "Constitution [or Edict] of Antoninus") declared that all free men in the Roman Empire were to be given [full Roman citizenship](#) and all free women in the Empire were given the same rights as Roman women, with the exception of the *dediticii*, people who had become subject to Rome through surrender in war, and freed slaves. So, from that point on, the Greeks were Romans – like everybody else.

LIVING IN A POST-TRUTH WORLD

How has our society reached the point where alternative facts based on wishful thinking are believed, one where crime and deception are protected by draconian secrecy laws in the name of public safety, and where the ideology of extremists and terrorists becomes the response of intolerant governments? Is any of this really new?

[2018, Oct 5: Authenticity](#) Rendering artefacts to suit a modern taste

[2018, Oct 17: You can only form the mind upon facts](#) Struggling to find them is getting harder

[2018, Nov 15: Mother of all kilograms](#) Standardising perceptions of reality

[2019, Jan 26: Fake History now?](#) The authenticity of images, still and moving.

[2019, Apr 17: What is real?](#) The question of originality

[2019, May 29: Tugging at the strings of memory](#) The documentary record vs fallible memory

[2020, Jan 4: What is Truth?](#) Professional methodologies and values

[2020, Mar 3: The public record](#) Undermining reliable sources of news

[2020, Nov 11: What the data proves ...](#) Facts, false claims, and fiction

2018, October 5: Authenticity

Article on the ABC site about [developments with "classical" music](#) – e.g. reusing melodies, artists adapting pieces to audience reactions, future of audience participation, etc. A kind of always becoming. The authentic composition is still the starting point, I suppose. But is it? Can't we have a record of the performance as well as the composition? What is a record of a performance? I think InterPARES looked at that. Is a performance a rendition of the composition or a new record?

I recall in my youth (so very many years ago, now) there was debate about performances using contemporary vs modern instruments and the differences in sound that resulted. Some argued that you could only have an authentic performance if you used instruments available in the composer's day. For me, the definitive answer was provided by Neville Marriner (St Martin's Academy) who was asked if he would be using contemporary rather than modern instruments in a planned Bach performance. They would be using the instruments, he said, that he thought Bach would use if he were alive today.

Sir Neville may have something to say to us about digital archiving techniques.

<<**Andrew:** FRBR (Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records) has a hierarchy of entities that sort of addresses what Chris was saying, albeit in a library context: the work, a distinct intellectual or artistic creation; the expression, the intellectual or artistic realization of a work; the manifestation, the physical embodiment of an expression of a work; the item, a single exemplar of a manifestation.>> I suppose that makes sense thus:

- **the work**, a distinct intellectual or artistic creation would be Shakespeare's *Macbeth*
- **the expression**, the intellectual or artistic realization of a work would be Orson Welles' *Macbeth*
- **the manifestation**, the physical embodiment of an expression of a work would be the film made of it
- **the item**, a single exemplar of a manifestation would be my DVD of the film.

But would each stage performance (unfilmed) be a different manifestation? Could this be applied to r/keeping?

- **the work**, the memory of an event or circumstance regardless of the materiality in which it exists
- **the expression**, the form + content + metadata in which it is captured
- **the manifestation**, the materiality in which it is rendered
- **the item**, each rendition regardless of format.

That analysis assumes, in both cases, that the thing itself (the play or the memory) is singular and unchanging. But how if the source "work" itself exists in a variety of versions – the varied texts of Shakespeare's plays, for example. How if a memory of the same event or circumstance exists in variant forms – cf. Bernard Wooley's [minutes of a disputed Cabinet discussion](#):

It is characteristic of all committee discussions and decisions that every member has a vivid recollection of them, and that every member's recollection of them differs violently from every other member's recollection; consequently we accept the convention that the official decisions are those and only those which have been officially recorded in the minutes by the officials; from which it emerges with elegant inevitability, that any decision which has been officially reached would have been officially recorded in the minutes by the officials, and any decision which is not recorded in the minutes by the officials has not been officially reached, even if one or more members believe they can recollect it; so in this particular case, if the decision would have been officially reached, it would have been recorded in the minutes by the officials and it isn't so it wasn't. (Sir Humphrey Appleby).

<<**Andrew:** I think FRBR would say that Shakespeare's concept for *Macbeth* is the work, the first folio version is an expression, a performance of the play is a manifestation, and a recording of a performance is an item...any performance even if not recorded is a manifestation. Works are abstract conceptualisations in FRBR, I think>> Perhaps that is the difference. Records are objective and contingent.

2018, October 8: <<**Michael Piggott:**...I once heard an ABC recorded performance of John Cage's 4'33". One could hear the distance sounds of Sydney harbour ferries, the air conditioning, coughing, and the occasional police siren ... quite apart from the noises caused by my radio! Second, [related issues](#) arise in preserving the "choreography=composition?" of dance, eg tango.>>

2018, November 21: <<**Michael Piggott:**...talking of "recorded performances", what a moment from the Banking Royal Commission earlier today, with our hero Rowena [Shock and] Orr, QC - who Chris first

drew out attention to on 30 April. **Here she is, quizzing no less than the CBA chair about keeping minutes of board meeting "performances".>>**

"Do you understand that a failure to comply with the requirements in relation to the keeping of minutes under section 251A of the Corporations Act is an offence?" Ms Orr asked. "I am. But these are the minutes of the meeting... and I assert again that I asked the question and received the response," Ms Livingstone replied. Ms Orr continued to probe Ms Livingstone on the topic, saying: "You can offer no explanation for why that is not reported in these minutes?" Ms Livingstone responded: "The explanation is the minutes don't usually record verbatim what is discussed at the board meeting." Mr Orr said she was not expecting the minutes to record verbatim what was discussed. "The keeping of accurate minutes of the board of an organisation like CBA is very important because those minutes are the evidence of the matters that are discussed in the meeting," Ms Orr said. "I understand that, Ms Orr," Ms Livingstone replied.

2018, November 26: <<Mulga: ... and to add to the list of terminology, Queensland University researcher, Dr Jenny Allen, refers to annual whale song changes as an 'evolution'>>

2019, November 9: Parragirls

<<Michael Piggott: they embark on a printmaking project that sees them trace the marks and words they secretly scratched into the walls and floors of the home so many years ago. They decode these tracings, remaking them, thus challenging the secrecy and judgement of the official welfare record and "[giving] it authentic meaning and purpose" >> The [associated exhibition](#) at the EPIC Centre in Paddington underlines the point that the artefact can itself be part of the record -

Although the facilities are heritage-listed, they're subject to the NSW Government's Parramatta North Urban Transformation, which could see parts of the precinct transformed or demolished ... "It was just turning into an absolute derelict site when I was going back," ... I kept thinking that this can't be, and that we'd have to do something. It was like being rendered silent" ... Under the stress of abuse and frequent segregation, many residents turned to self-harm, and some of these stories are recounted in *Parragirls Past, Present*. Some of the girls would scratch marks into their bodies, and would also scratch marks into the walls of the rooms in which they were locked. "The building itself is scarred with our marks, and many of the women's bodies are scarred with the same marks," Djuric says. Although many of those markings have since been painted over, some remain and have even been used as evidence in cases of sexual assault...

2018, October 17: You can only form the mind upon facts

"Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them."

I stopped wanting to be a teacher about half-way through my postgraduate year at Teachers' College when I concluded that education in Australia was more about what to learn than how to learn. Nothing in the ensuing fifty years convinces me otherwise.

[The school library is fighting for its survival](#). In many Australian schools, libraries are being starved of funding and run by unqualified staff. Some new schools are even being built without libraries ... Libraries are starved of funds and bypassed by educators who think the internet replaces books, according to experts ... According to figures from the Australian Council for Educational Research, the number of teacher-librarians working in primary schools plummeted from 5600 in 2010 to 1300 in 2013. School Library Association of Victoria executive officer Dr Susan La Marca said in an era of fake news, school libraries had become more important than ever before. She said teacher librarians helped students use search engines, navigate the internet and separate fact from fiction. "In a world where all sorts of information is flung at our children at a record speed, they need help to critically analyse it," she said

Fifty years on, it's possible to be even more pessimistic about the state of our education system: it's about what to think, not how to think. Not a new phenomenon; Dickens had it taped in his portrayal of Gradgrind. But Gradgrind would not have encountered the bickering over Facts that we endure now. Perhaps, for the modern age, Chadband is the better exemplar:

"... Which says, 'I don't know.' Then I will tell you why. I say this brother present here among us is devoid of parents, devoid of relations, devoid of flocks and herds, devoid of gold, of silver, and of precious stones because he is devoid of the light that shines in upon some of us. What is that light? What is it? I ask you, what is that light?" Mr. Chadband draws back his head and pauses, but Mr. Snagsby is not to be lured on to his destruction again. Mr. Chadband, leaning forward over the table, pierces what he has got to follow

directly into Mr. Snagsby with the thumb-nail already mentioned. "It is," says Chadband, "the ray of rays, the sun of suns, the moon of moons, the star of stars. It is the light of Terewth." Mr. Chadband draws himself up again and looks triumphantly at Mr. Snagsby as if he would be glad to know how he feels after that. "Of Terewth," says Mr. Chadband, hitting him again. "Say not to me that it is NOT the lamp of lamps. I say to you it is. I say to you, a million of times over, it is. It is! I say to you that I will proclaim it to you, whether you like it or not; nay, that the less you like it, the more I will proclaim it to you. With a speaking-trumpet! I say to you that if you rear yourself against it, you shall fall, you shall be bruised, you shall be battered, you shall be flawed, you shall be smashed."

Teach a child how to think, then instil a sense of humour and proportion. Who said that? Mr Chipping, perhaps. Not possible nowadays, of course.

2019, May 21: Who decides when information is true?

There's a [Change Org petition](#) to introduce Truth in Media Laws. NOW!

The media landscape in Australia has eroded to such an extent that the prevalence of agenda-driven media beatups, out-and-out fake news and what can only be described as media organisations functioning as de-facto publicity departments for conservative political parties has blurred the line between what is actually news and what is opinion. Nations around the world have introduced truth in media laws, making media organisations accountable to the truth. It is time that truth in media laws were passed by the Federal Government to end this toxic and frankly, rubbish media landscape and bring in much needed reforms committing all media organisations to truth in reporting and truth in media.

I think there's a problem. I don't think this is the solution. And I doubt that such laws exist "around the world" outside of totalitarian regimes (whose interest in deciding what is true and what is not is understandable and Orwellian).

[Related story](#) from US re Canada:

... a rather small decision by a relatively small government agency—the decision not to revoke a rule that bans lying on broadcast news—in Ottawa has made a pretty big splash. It stems from the planned April launch of Sun TV, a Canadian analog to FOX News ... The launch drew attention to a seldom-scrutinized regulatory agency called the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), similar to the Federal Communications Commission in the United States. With little fanfare, the CRTC last month scrapped a proposal to revoke or relax a rule on "[prohibited programming content](#)" that includes "broadcasting false or misleading news." The CRTC withdrew the plan when a legislative committee determined that the rule does not run afoul of the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#), which like the U.S. Constitution, guarantees [press freedoms](#). The Canadian media speculated that the withdrawal may have been provoked in no small part by the large sector of the public that voiced its displeasure at the idea of Sun TV [coarsening the public discourse](#) and deliberately [muddying the political waters](#), akin to what they see [in American media](#). The agency's chair denied that Sun TV factored in at all, noting that the plan to rescind the rule had been in the works for 10 years, and that the rule has [never](#) been invoked. Still, U.S. media pricked up their ears at the news, inviting Canadian legal experts to explain the issue, a rather foreign concept to the American mind. The very notion is almost shocking: You can ban lying in the news?! The question was asked time and again: Could something like that happen here? The short answer is, no. The [First Amendment](#) does not permit government interference with "the freedom of the press." What that freedom is, is among the great undefined terms in American jurisprudence. But its enduring strength is that few are willing to take the first step down the slippery slope of determining who is a journalist and who is not, and what constitutes good journalism and what does not. It's all protected, for good or ill.

... There are plenty of examples of constitutionally protected bad journalism. In the 1991 case [Masson v. The New Yorker](#), the Supreme Court ruled that deliberately, falsely attributing quotes to a speaker does not necessarily give rise to a defamation claim, even when the manufactured quotes cast the "speaker" in a negative light. That is, it is not "[actual malice](#)," in legal terms, to act with malice. An even more egregious story from 1997 involves Jane Akre and Steve Wilson, TV journalists pressured by their employer, Tampa-based Fox affiliate WTVT, to alter a story on the use of recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) in dairy production and [its potential health risks](#) to consumers. Akre and Wilson said they were [ordered](#) by Fox executives to change the story by inserting statements from rBGH manufacturer Monsanto that they knew to be false. They claimed that they were fired after refusing to do so and threatening to report the station to the FCC. They sued for wrongful termination, asserting that their firing violated Florida's whistleblower protection statute. A jury ruled in Akre's favor, awarding her \$425,000 in damages.

But a state appeals court overturned that decision in 2003, finding that the FCC's policy against "[distorting the news](#)" does not rise to the level of a law or regulation. In short, the court bought Fox's argument that there is no law to stop them from deliberately falsifying the news. "False," of course, is often conditional and sometimes subjective. It's a standard that would be hard to enforce, subject to the whims and political ideas of judges and juries. Who determines that something is false? On what basis? And what review mechanism could ensure that the decision was reached fairly in most instances, let alone every one? And that's before you even get to the question of what news is, and what it means to practice journalism. No, those are questions that can't be answered with any reasonable reliability. The best we can hope for is transparency, integrity, and accountability. ... <<More>> ...

2019, September 2: Facts in evidence

While reading Laura Millar's book (*A Matter of Facts: Evidence in the Information Age*) I came across an article about alleged ABS "misrepresentation" of wealth inequality in Australia. It resonated with some of the reservations growing in my mind (as I read her book) about Millar's thesis.

Gradgrind: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Facts alone are wanted in life ... Girl number twenty unable to define a horse! ... Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, yours." Bitzer: "Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." (**Charles Dickens, *Hard Times***)

Millar's basic themes - the importance of evidence-based data in public debate and the distinction between fact and opinion - I have no quarrel with. Her methods - anecdotal and purposefully not "philosophical" - raise problems for me. Even at the most elementary level and in a work avowedly aimed at the general reader, this topic unavoidably raises philosophical questions (however defined, however framed). The questions forming in my mind have to do with whether or not "facts" speak for themselves, how far facts found in "documents" (however defined) tell the whole story, whether facts found in a record stand in isolation (what about structure and context, to say nothing of relationships?), and how "facts" stand in relation to interpretation (recognising the distinction between opinion and interpretation).

Slery: "People must be amuthed. They can't be alwayth a learning, nor yet they can't be alwayth a working, they an't made for it. You mutht have uth, Thquire. Do the withe thing and the kind thing too, and make the betht of uth; not the wurtht." (**Hard Times**)

Perhaps more of all this anon when I have mulled over it some more. Meanwhile, the story about wealth inequality strikes a few chords. The row is about how the data is represented and interpreted. There is no suggestion that ABS is falsifying data as such. But if facts are inseparable from presentation and interpretation, that's almost (but not wholly) irrelevant.

References to wealth inequality reaching its peak in 2017-18 were removed from an [Australian Bureau of Statistics press release](#) to help craft a "good media story", according to internal documents. The emails and drafts show the ABS issued a separate income inequality media release in July to create a narrative of "stable" inequality despite wealth inequality on the rise, with one email noting the ABS did not want to "draw attention" to a bad result for the poorest households ... An email on 26 June notes that the lowest quintile has seen "a significant change" from 2015-16 to 2017-18, down from 0.8% of all household wealth to 0.7%, or an average of \$37,900 per household down to \$35,200. Its unidentified author notes: "I'm not sure that we want to draw attention to this though." The phrase "the lowest 20% controlled less than 1 per cent of all household wealth, with average wealth currently at \$35,200" was retained in the final release, without noting the deterioration ... The ABS spokesman told Guardian Australia that "The ABS strongly refutes any claim that it has attempted to misrepresent this data." All information was "freely available on our website" ... "It is usual practice for changes to be made to media release content during drafting, until finalised. This is a normal iterative process designed to produce both statistically accurate and engaging information." ...

Statistically accurate I can buy, but "engaging"? Hmmmmmm. It all goes back (for me) to my argument with McKemmish and Burns over use of the term "patriarchal" in a finding aid describing 19th century records of the Victorian Executive (cf. earlier post). I said it was anachronistic (accuracy), they said it was true (accurate by a different bench-mark). I preferred language that was historically aligned, they wanted to employ contemporary usage. Their term was colourful (engaging users with terminology that was meaningful to them thereby enhancing comprehension) but, in my view, it disguised differences between

the epochs (and therefore blurred the user's understanding). But one thing was certain: the "facts" had to be represented somehow and interpretation (of one kind or another) was unavoidable.

<<**Andrew Waugh**:... anyone who has ever attempted to turn 'facts' into a story (history, journalism, law...) would answer that facts don't speak for themselves, facts in documents don't necessarily tell the whole story, facts never stand in isolation, and facts must always be interpreted even in works that appear just as collections of facts, there is an enormous amount of judgement required to interpret what the facts actually mean, and to reconcile conflicting facts. And this requires the author to consider 'why?' and 'what does it mean?', even if they never explicitly acknowledge this in the actual work.>> Yes. Dickens' joke, of course, is that we suspect that while Bitzer can define a horse to Gradgrind's satisfaction he may not actually know what a horse is whereas Sissy Jupe, who cannot recite the facts but comes from a circus family, undoubtedly does. PS I was not suggesting, by the way, that Laura Millar does not (or cannot) deal with the questions I raise. At this stage, they are questions for me arising while I read her book. Whether they resolve themselves into questions for her remains to be seen.

2018, November 15: Mother of all kilograms

Interesting take on [accuracy and authenticity](#):

... Scientists from more than 60 countries will vote on Friday on whether a lump of metal held in a Parisian vault should continue to be the definition of a kilogram. Le Grand K, a small cylinder of titanium alloy, has set the standard since 1889. All the scales in the world are ultimately calibrated against it ... The problem, though, is that while the mother of all kilograms has only been taken out of its protective case four times in the last century, it has lost atoms and therefore mass. It amounts to just 20 billionths of a gram, about the weight of an eyelash, but in a world that needs to weigh objects with ever greater accuracy, that's a big deal ... Scientists ... are now part of the global effort to devise a more accurate, immutable definition of a kilogram that is no longer dependent on a physical object. They are using what is known as a Kibble Balance ... to express the mass of a kilogram in terms of the amount of upward electromagnetic force is needed to balance the downward drag of gravity. Then with some heavy-duty maths, they relate that to a fundamental physical law of nature.

2018, November 16: << **Andrew Waugh**: It's the last of the seven fundamental measures to be redefined in terms of absolute characteristics. So it is a really big deal. (The other six are length (metre), time (second), temperature (Kelvin), amount of substance (mole), electric current (Ampere), and luminous intensity (Candela).) Incidentally, Le Grand K cannot change its weight. The weight of Le Grand K *is* one kilogram by definition. If it loses a couple of atoms, then everything else gets slightly heavier.>> An interesting interplay between absolute truth (the definition of a kilogram) and qualified truth (the actual mass of Le Grand K).. Puts me in mind of an anecdote told by Abraham Lincoln in a [speech to the Wisconsin Agricultural Society](#) (1859):

It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence, to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate in all times and situations. They presented him the words: "And this, too, shall pass away." How much it expresses! How chastening in the hour of pride! -- how consoling in the depths of affliction!

But context, as we r/keepers know, is all. $1+1=2$. But one pile of sludge added to another pile of different volume just produces one big pile of sludge that is not even twice the volume of either of the two you started with. The joke here is that Lincoln's speech proceeds to express the hope that the American Union will not succumb to this universal truth:

And yet let us hope it is not quite true. Let us hope, rather, that by the best cultivation of the physical world, beneath and around us; and the intellectual and moral world within us, we shall secure an individual, social, and political prosperity and happiness, whose course shall be onward and upward, and which, while the earth endures, shall not pass away.

- foreshadowing the words of a later (and greater) speech: "...[shall not perish from the earth](#)..."

2020, November 18: Still on the theme of accuracy and authenticity, I have long wanted to write something about the way we describe records (not about the more obvious theme of how we perceive and understand them but about the prose we use). Controlled vocabularies used in taxonomies are more forgiving of weasel words (though the paucity and poverty of scope notes is still a worry) but we continue

to employ joined up prose to describe records and recordkeeping. So, maybe there's still time for a useful debate about prose standards. An article in the *Guardian* dealing with [word-extinction](#) has some relevant things to say.

... when I read last week of Edward Allhusen, a writer who has gathered together in a book called *Betrumped* (v to cheat or deceive) some 600 English words he fears are shortly to become extinct, something about it spoke to me – and not only because “lickspittle” is a term I use quite often ... Perhaps it was the politicians with their reliance on such emptinesses as “going forward” and “[a deal that delivers](#)” ... Perhaps it was the highly intelligent people I heard last week fall back on the dreaded “journey” to describe something that was not even close to being one ... I experienced a sudden and powerful yearning for the novel and the lively, the particular and the pungent. All around us is an enervating linguistic blandness. It comprises an awful lot of repetition, a certain amount of misuse, and a drastic devaluation when it comes to words that should have huge and grave import. These politicians who talked of “catastrophe” long before any iceberg was in sight. Why didn't they save it up? ... People don't listen to politicians not only because they're inclined to dissemble. It's because we can no longer *hear* them; their vague, insipid words, as pale and lifeless as primroses kept too long out of water, simply don't catch on the ear ... When language is precise, chosen with care and used with relish, it rings like a bell. We all know this, and many of us have a great hunger for it – an appetite that only swells as the word pail grows ever dustier ...

Many years ago, I made somewhat similar remarks on the decline that had taken place in the prose being employed in source documents we use in preparing descriptions:

The first problem we face is that the object of our study is not scientific phenomena operating according to the “laws” of nature but products of the human mind and the political process. It may be pleasing to reduce human endeavour to the scale of plants and microbes but we are warned against carrying the analogy too far. On the other hand, we may take comfort from the observation that in nature's complexity, too, unqualified predictive laws can rarely be applied without allowing for numerous exceptions. Any methodology of function analysis must similarly allow for the illogicality, confusion, and obfuscations in human thought and behaviour. Even the documentary evidence of these obscure truths is now debased. Compare the noble clarity of nineteenth century administrative prose with this recent example from which only three identifying phrases (8 words) have been omitted –

The Department of has the objective of developing as a responsive, responsible, effective and efficient organisation implementing Government policy for maximising long-term economic development for Victoria through in ways that are consistent with sustainable and efficient use of resources and equitably meeting the priority needs of Victorians in

Deriving any useful idea of purpose, leave alone discrete function, from this verbal sludge is quite impossible. “[What, if anything, is a function](#)” p.4.

PS. The Department of ... in the quotation above was, in fact, the Victorian D. of Agriculture.

2019, January 26: Fake History now?

A curious piece in the *Guardian* by Simon Jenkins claims that fake-history films are a “new” threat to truth. “Is this the death of journalism,” he asks, “or just of history?” Who is he kidding? Films “based” on history have always been fake, often grotesquely so. There's nothing new about it. I well remember as a lad seeing *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) with Errol Flynn. We were asked to believe that an evil Indian Prince standing behind Russian lines was responsible for an atrocity when the Light Brigade was stationed in India (a ludicrous notion in itself because it ignores the distinction between the British and Indian Armies) and that the charge was inspired by their desire to inflict revenge. But such films entertained and they piqued my interest so I went away from them to trusted sources (books in libraries) to find out what really happened. Giving me a motive to learn, I thought, was a good thing.

Later, at university, we discussed this in the history honours class. What status do we give Shakespeare's history plays? They aren't factually correct and the dialogue is (obviously) made up, but is there a sense in which the poetic depiction of events reveals a truth that mere facts do not. Was Henry V a hero or a brute? Is it worth anyone's while trying to disentangle it from the poetry? How should it stand in relation to historical study? I referred to a similar issue in an earlier post when I recalled how some in the same class (including me) reacted to the news that the speeches in Thucydides were made up. Jenkins cites recent films (including the monstrously distorted *Darkest Hour* and other new films about Dick Cheney and James Graham's *Brexit: The Uncivil War*).

... Graham declared a desire “to make sense of [how the fault lines began](#) ... to do what journalism cannot do.” ... Well, he is right on that. Journalism does not deliberately lie, like Darkest Hour lied, like The Crown lied, like All the Money in the World lied. Film-makers claim the right to mis-sell films as history, sexed up with invention. They do so not because they have researched history and found it wrong, but because they fear accuracy will not put bums on seats. They must make [Brexit](#) into Game of Thrones ... I recall the reply when I chided a director about his fabricating a scene. “I am an artist,” he said with a faint sneer. “You are a journalist.”

Is there anything to the claim that fake-history now is more harmful than it was before? The fabrications are certainly no more egregious. Is it possible that the effect is more baleful? Jenkins argues-

... Journalists flatter themselves with the Washington Post’s claim to be “a first rough draft of history”. But they are charged, in the time available, to describe the world as it really is. They rightly call facts sacred. No serious journalist takes pride in inaccuracy. If it occurs, there are lawyers and regulators ready to demand correction. When the likes of Trump accuse the world of fake news, we need tools, definitions, concepts of accuracy to rebut him. Why give him a free pass with fake instant history? If a newspaper declared on its front page, “These stories are based on real events, and some of them are true”, it would be laughed out of court. When films do it, they claim Oscars ...

I think there may be something in this. What is different is the social context into which such trash is being delivered. It began decades ago with a seemingly respectable, postmodern assault on values such as objectivity and impartiality and has now degenerated into a [populist contempt for truth](#) that may be deforming and [subverting our democracy](#). These films must be judged against that background, not in the same way as those of Hollywood’s Golden Age but as part of a current cultural framework – what we are starting to call the [post-truth age](#). As witnesses to truth, we have a stake in this.

The other difference is ubiquity. In 1936, people went to the movies maybe once a week on Saturday. Not even that if you lived in the bush. With TV, DVD, streaming, etc. this stuff occupies many more waking hours for many people. When I look up from my book or newspaper on the train between Gosford and Sydney, nearly everyone is peering into a device. Some of them will be tweeting, some will have downloaded Gibbon’s *Decline & Fall*, but when I peek an awful lot of them are watching trashy TV. So, if modern fake-history films are having an impact as Jenkins says, they are doing so at a level that Sam Goldwyn could never have dreamed of.

PS. If you want a laugh, compare the story-line in [Braveheart](#) (once described as the second most inaccurate movie of all time) where Wallace seduces Isabella (wife to future Edward II) and then look up the relevant dates.

PPS. No, I don’t know which is the most inaccurate movie of all time. *Lawrence of Arabia*? Other contenders include [Pocahontas](#) (1995), [The Patriot](#) (2000: another Mel Gibson stinker), [Pearl Harbor](#) (2001), and [Birth of a Nation](#) (1915). Griffith’s masterpiece was a gigantic leap forward in film-making - a metaphor, perhaps, for the difference between art and history (the difference between trash and history, too, of course).

2019, January 27: <<[Michael Piggott](#):...we’ll have some chance of a balanced conclusion in 100 years>>
A feather-weight on the scales in which that issue is to be balanced may be found in an article by Hans Blockland entitled

[How Postmodernism Enhanced Populism: An Inside Story from the Netherlands](#).

It provides a tantalising inter-weaving of three themes:

The blurring of opinion and fact

The columnist publishes ... a piece of approximately 550 words in which he, in an ironic, indignant or enraged way, proclaims an opinion. The small number of words available to him, offers the welcome excuse for the lack of substantiation and depth ... it is rarely the case that the columnist possesses a specific competence, knowledge or experience ... we no longer only hail [him] in the newspaper columns. He can be found wherever there are microphones, cameras and audiences. Not just in newspapers, the opinions of columnists often have pushed the actual news articles to the margin. He has also taken over most talk or information shows on radio and television ...

The paradox of elitism outside a cultural tradition

With regard to the subsidized arts, the Dutch citizens have already voted with their feet: most of them stay home ... Just a very small, highly educated and well paid public still makes use of it ... Only the complacent paternalism of the left cabal can explain why this supply is still subsidized with the hard-earned tax money of “Henk and Ingrid”, the supposedly average Dutch taxpayers ... the traditional political parties wanted to avoid ... portray[al] as elitist and paternalist ... there was growing awareness that the existing cultural policies were more and more difficult to legitimate ... Artists came to depicted [sic] themselves less and less as representatives of a cultural tradition expressing esthetically its intrinsic values and certainties, or as members of a cultural community critically but engaged reflecting on its indorsed truths and untruths. Instead, artists more and more saw themselves as outsiders, or, maybe better: as superiors. Fewer and fewer artists went in conversations with the broader society, whose members were invariably considered smallminded, petty and shallow. More and more they communicated with and reacted to each other.

Postmodern assaults on “quality” within the cultural tradition

... policymakers could have tried to strengthen the cultural competences of the public ... Cultural education could have strengthened the knowledge and experience needed, and would consequently have increased the freedom of the individual to make autonomous choices, choices not predetermined by, especially, social background ... this policy option received severe resistance in the world of academics and columnists ... the idea had spread that the motivation behind cultural participation, certainly participation in what was considered “bourgeois” culture was “distinction” ... The existence of measures or standards of quality that were not entirely sociological and subjective, was denied ... The upshot was that policies aimed at the dissemination of culture were denounced as elitist and paternalistic ... A second policy option motivated the artist ... to see himself somewhat more as a member of society ... This road turned out to be impassable as well ... the general response was, a politically sanctioned or approved art [but] in his creative work the artist should be totally free, autonomous and sovereign.

In his [blog post](#), Jack Solomon argues for a re-assertion of cultural values:

I’ve run across ... Andrew J. Perrin’s [“Stop Blaming Postmodernism for Post-Truth Politics.”](#) That’s an easy request to honor: certainly the supporters of such alt-fact politicians as Donald Trump can hardly be expected to have been influenced by —much less, have read—the texts of contemporary postmodern theory ... the question is how educators can best contest, in the classroom, the contentions of the post-truth world ... Perrin ... feels that we need *more* postmodernism in the face of the post-truth era because of the way that it exposes the ways in which “all claims, beliefs, and symbols are tied up with the structures of power and representation that give rise to them.” ... It is central to [Foucault’s] notion of “discourse,” ... that reality (and the knowledge thereof) is constructed by systems of signs ... whoever controls the sign system controls what counts as “reality,” as “truth” itself ... Thus, it comes down to a simple question. What is a more effective response to the post-truth claim, for example, that climate science is hoax: the position that *all* scientific claims are expressions of power/knowledge, or the position that concrete empirical evidence gets us closer to the truth of climate change than do the claims of power? ... I prefer to *oppose* power/knowledge with objectively measurable data. For me, reality is not subject to a referendum.

2020, May 9: Documentary archival footage

Languishing at home during the anniversary of VE Day, I’m getting to watch TV documentaries even more than usual and to reflect on what I see. How authentic is the footage? It comes in at least four categories (so far as I can see) and probably more -

1. **Recall:** eye-witnesses recounting what they themselves saw/experienced or historian/interpreters giving an account of the events - leaving aside whether the teller’s purpose is truth, persuasion, or ideology.
2. **Reality:** film taken of events staged for public display or propaganda and usually with the intention or expectation that they would be filmed (the Big Three at Yalta, Eisenhower inspecting the

camps, executions, etc.). The intention of the participants is to demonstrate or to persuade and of the filmmaker to collaborate or record.

3. **Actualité:** Reporters capturing events as they occur (death marches, riots, combat. etc.). This purports to be real but we know much of it was staged – participants being asked to perform according to the wishes of the reporter or to do it again if the footage wasn't quite what was wanted.
4. **Re-enactment:** actors with or without dialogue performing for the camera actions that the documentary maker portrays as true and which may or may not be over-printed with the word "re-enactment". Perhaps they feel that this is unnecessary when showing King John signing Magna Carta but then again in a recent doco about the Tower of London one of the warders said he was asked once why they built it so close to the underground.

There are numerous questions about the authenticity of documentary footage (some of which are indicated above) not least the provenance and context of the artefact and the purpose for which it was made. I think the first and last categories are the most straightforward in the sense that they are most easily evaluated critically. Category 2 is more seductive and more opaque. Category 3 is the most problematic. But at a more basic level, I am bemused by the use of footage purporting to be something that it is not. Two examples from the last 24 hours on the History Channel -

- Footage of an almost comatose, woman bloody and bruised, staggering along a country road purporting to be an escapee from a concentration camp but actually a German woman who had been repeatedly raped by Russian soldiers.
- Footage of women in a line clearing rubble purporting to be camp inmates cleaning up after liberation but actually survivors of Allied bombing clearing debris from bombed out city buildings. In this case, the fraud is obvious because it is clearly a bombed out streetscape.

The second fraud is easily spotted from internal evidence but how do I know about the first? Only because I have seen it before in another context. And, when it comes right down to it, how do I know which of the narratives is true? The frauds are twofold: using the footage as evidence for what it does not show and falsifying what the footage actually does show.

The first hit from a Google search for “documentary historic footage” is [Shutterstock](#) (“Royalty-free stock footage”). Clips include “[I Have a Dream](#)” speech, [Kemal Ataturk industrialises Turkey in 1930s](#), [Nelson Mandela's release 1990](#). and [medieval battle re-enactment](#). There is practically no information about provenance. You can fit the footage into any narrative you please (for a fee). On the same results page there is [discussion by documentary filmmakers](#) of the use of “archival” footage-

... Alongside new strategies for shooting, structuring, narrating, interviewing, dramatizing and advocating, there have been myriad ways of employing archival footage ... there seems to be no end to the ways in which documentarians can marshal archival material to support, amplify, shape and define their art ... “The use of archival in documentary film is the re-appropriation of previously recorded documents, images and sounds from the historical world which comes with all kinds of beautiful possibilities, creatively, but it also has to do with responsibility and is fraught with dangers ... For instance, when somebody says, ‘we came to New York in the early '70s,’ but you don't have footage of them in the early '70s, and you don't want to use one of the few pictures you have [in that spot]—many documentaries will go to an archive house and get some random footage of New York in the '70s.”

This is a really interesting discussion. My question, however, is this: with the availability of this stuff on the Internet and in digital repositories that don't employ rigorous recordkeeping values, what is our role in upholding authenticity of the sources? Controlling how the footage is used ("re-appropriated") is clearly beyond our power (and arguably beyond our remit) but what should we do (what can we do) to be more than just another content source? Do we try to preserve contextuality and structure (with the attendant difficulties for users) or adopt a quarry mentality? Is there a middle way that preserves the integrity of the material while making it easier to use? What is the tension (for the custodian) between supporting use and supporting understanding?

PS. A Google search for “documentary archival footage” yields virtually the same results. Sigh!

PPS. If the clips on Shutterstock are royalty-free, what exactly are you paying for?

2020, July 27: The History Channel is currently screening a documentary series on the American Civil War entitled *Blood and Glory: The Civil War in Color*. It features colourised contemporary still images. The introductory voice-over describes this as a “restoration” – the idea being that the colourised image shows how the subject really was at the time the image was created. Interesting concept.

The black-and-white image is a flawed or incomplete representation of what the camera saw because it omits to capture the colour of its subject. Does colourisation restore that lost feature thereby making it a more complete record or does it create an augmented rendition of the image? Or is it a new record altogether - being a copy of the original rather than a rendition? Preservation of images (especially moving images) involves the production of successive renditions – sometimes multiplied for preservation use and as masters for the generation of use or reference copies (the masters themselves are sometimes multiplied to produce several generations in order to reduce wear and tear). The focus of attention is on maintaining the image rather than the medium on which it was captured or even the form in which it was captured when a photographic image is digitised. It is possible to regard each rendering under the recordkeeper's hand as THE image even though each of them is additional to the original (whatever that means in this context). The same idea applies to dealing with data, the preservation of which (the use of which even) involves a succession of renderings.

Damage to the image (or to the data) that spoils the surface of the image (or the completeness of the data) can be repaired so that we can speak meaningfully of the record being restored when that is done. I suppose the difference between that and colourisation is that replacing lost features of the artefact can properly be described as a restoration whereas adding a feature that the artefact never had should not be so regarded. But is there a sense in which colourisation can be seen as a form of restoration where photo-shopping is not? The feature being added (restored) to the image belonged originally to the event/circumstance being captured and it was lost, not from the artefact but from memory, when it was reduced to black-and-white.

How does the addition of colour to an image differ from the addition of context to a description?

<<Chris Gousmett: I recently watched a documentary on the background to the Titanic sinking ... What intrigued me was the way still photos from the time were "animated" to the extent that they showed the launching of the ship, using still photos animated which looked like a real movie ... So now it can be harder to tell whether something "actually" happened as the movie shows, or is a manipulation of still photos.>>

<<Andrew Waugh: Colourisation is not a restoration; you can't restore something that wasn't originally there. And, of course, it is a complete fantasy to believe that the colourised versions represent how 'it really was' - it's quite impossible to know the actual colours. And, if you look at them, you will quickly realise that they use a very restricted colour palette, nothing like the range of colours that would have actually been present. They are some modern graphic artist's belief, based on modern analogies and, hopefully, historical research into what the colours might have been. At best they give the viewer a sense of what it might have looked like, at worst they would be completely misleading. If you like, they are a visual equivalent of Carey's 'True History of the Kelly Gang' - fundamentally they are judged successful if modern viewers (or readers) feel that they are true. Historical truth is not necessarily a consideration. Renditions are a fact of archival life; all media has a shelf life, and that shelf life can be surprisingly short, particularly when the damage associated with using it is taken into account. In the case of film, the risk of damage running it through a projector is considerable (even if only copying it). Microfilm has the same problem. Rothenberg used to say something along the lines of "Digital objects last forever, or for a decade, whichever comes first." My response was "Paper lasts for hundreds of years, unless it's read.">>

<<John Waddingham: ... photographs ... are not and can never be 'the' thing but rather a graphical representation of 'that' thing. I was going to say that really, the negative (in this case the 1860s equivalent) is the original created representation and any print is just a derivative anyway and you can do what you like, whatever you call that action (as long as you document it; including its origin/provenance). But then I thought of Mr Hurley's namesake Frank who composed classic images of WW1 by combining the content of several individual negatives into a single print. So offended by this practice the official historian Charles Bean deemed the representations 'little short of fake' ...>> The [recordkeeper's defence](#) –

It is characteristic of all committee discussions and decisions that every member has a vivid recollection of them and that every member's recollection of them differs violently from every other member's recollection. Consequently we accept the convention that the official decisions are those and only those which have [been] officially recorded in the minutes by the officials, from which it emerges with an elegant inevitability that any decision which has been officially reached will have been officially recorded in the minutes by the officials and any decision which is not recorded in the minutes has not been officially reached even if one or more members believe they can recollect it, so in this particular case if the decision had been officially reached it would have been officially recorded in the minutes by the officials. And it isn't so it wasn't.

Originality is a tricky concept. I respect Jenkinson's maxim that we must try to add nothing to and take nothing from ... I laid all that out in my 1977 [defence of original order](#) (though I might not write it the same way now). All the same, since I hold that the record is more than the artefact, more than its content, I can't leave it at that. The point of my question drawing a comparison between colourising an image and describing an artefact is that *understanding* of context and structure isn't an addition to the record but truly something that **was** originally there (which we endeavour to capture in descriptions). The "[Well done!](#)" example is used to demonstrate this and it is implicit in the whole data/metadata discourse.

To my mind, the case against colourisation is more about capture than originality. On those lines, I would say that Andrew's argument tends towards establishing that authentic colours are beyond recovery and therefore cannot be captured. Would that argument fail, however, supposing it were in fact possible "to know the actual colours"? I suppose not.

Others are holding a more nuanced debate over "the re-appropriation of previously recorded documents, images and sounds from the historical world which comes with all kinds of beautiful possibilities, creatively, but ... also has to do with responsibility and is fraught with dangers ..." (cf. my post of 9 May). Our commitment to authenticity should not be compromised, of course, but should we disenfranchise ourselves absolutely from contributing something useful from our perspective to assist those struggling to distinguish re-appropriation from fakery? Or, should we just tell them they need to better understand what a record is or else tell ourselves it's none of our business?

2021, March 10: Seeing the past

It is [argued](#) that colourisation of historical B&W footage is a manipulation of the artefact and therefore a distortion of our memory of the fact.

... the second season of SBS's four-part documentary series *Australia in Colour* ... is a project of restoration as well as preservation. These practices are linked but, in [the words of](#) Australian Centre for the Moving Image digital preservation technician Ben Abbott, "discreetly different concepts" ... the film-makers use cutting edge technology to colourise dusty black and white footage supplied by the NFSA ... *Australia in Colour* belongs to a growing trend of recent historical documentaries that apply colourisation processes including TV productions *America in Colour* (three seasons, from 2017 to 2020), *Auschwitz Untold: In Colour* (2020) and Peter Jackson's 2018 film *They Shall Not Grow Old*, which restored and embellished first world war footage supplied by London's Imperial War Museum.

It is clear that selecting footage to develop a theme (an interpretation of the past) whether in B&W or colour is not preservation *per se* – though steps taken to prolong the life of the images. or a rendition of them, may be involved. And film preservation can (arguably) legitimately involve enhancement of the fading image. But that's a tricky line to draw.

... In *They Shall Not Grow Old* ... [Jackson's] primary interest lay ... not in correcting injustices but using technology to pursue visually authentic representations of the past. The director expressed utter faith in his processes, insisting that "we're not adding anything that wasn't there on the day it was shot" but rather "bringing it back to what it was 100 years ago". But that's simply not true. As [the NFSA website](#) explains, choosing colours and shades to apply to these kinds of productions involves making decisions informed by various sources, from weather records to letters, newspaper reports and interviews with historians. The idea that we are watching the *exact* colours once observed in real-life is absurd.

So we have an interesting paradox: through the pursuit of historical accuracy the film-makers have ushered into existence a new kind of fiction. Some believe this sort of fiction – born in the era of sophisticated digital

manipulation – has altered the very nature of cinema ... what looks and sounds convincing to contemporary viewers inevitably changes as technologies evolve ...

Where it gets really hairy is what in this discussion is referred to as “immersive experiences”.

We have entered a new era of immersive experiences now, during these nascent years of virtual and augmented realities ... There are already many historical VR experiences, including tours of [Anne Frank's Secret Annex](#) and journeys [through concentration camps](#) ... “the audience will not only be in the middle of the story but they'll be able to move around within it” ... By that point, the idea of a production spruiking the novelty of turning black-and-white pictures into colour will feel rather quaint. The makers of these next-gen spatial experiences will need to do their research to make informed decisions about how to accurately render these spaces ... Who will keep track of these new kinds of content? How will they be captured, preserved, restored? As artists continue the dialogue between past and future, finding new ways to look forward while looking back, it's likely the current era of moving image preservation – with all its challenges and consequences, its sense of gradual loss – will feel like the good old days in comparison.

It's easy to sniff and say: well, that's got nothing to do with recordkeeping. But how different is it from putting the user into the middle of a story through contextualisation and description? We acknowledge, some of us, that preservation and presentation make us part of the records-making process and not simply record-keepers - players not just by-standers. I for one have never doubted the dangers inherent in that concept (the slippery-ness of the idea) and the discussion of these possibilities illustrate that very well.

2019, April 17: What is real?

Already, in relation to the restoration of Notre Dame, the question of [originality and authenticity](#) has been raised.

... Part of the reason this loss is so upsetting is because we are immersed in a Western way of thinking that equates authenticity with preserving the original ... Iconic buildings such as the Palace of Catherine the Great in Russia and Japan's historic monuments of Ancient Nara have been successfully restored, sometimes after great damage, and are today appreciated by millions of people ... But ... the definition and assessment of authenticity is a complex matter. The World Heritage Convention states that properties may be understood to meet the conditions of authenticity if their cultural values “are truthfully and credibly expressed”. Accordingly, a building's authenticity is determined in relation to its location and setting, use and function, spirit and feeling, and well as form and materials ... The Palace of Catherine I at Tsarskoe Selo (Pushkin), south of Petersburg, was gutted during World War II ... Nevertheless, the government provided the resources to allow room-by-room restorations ... Panels that had been looted by the Nazis were recreated ... Today, the Palace is fully restored ... The fire at Notre Dame has [endangered a vast collection of Christian relics and artworks](#) housed within the building and on its grounds ... First responders saved many, but not all, objects. We do not yet know which ones have survived. Does the argument regarding authenticity also apply to these relics and precious artworks? ... [with] relics and artworks ... partially damaged by fire, smoke and falling building materials ... the focus will be on restoration ... [with] relics or artworks ... virtually, or entirely, destroyed ... the artworks can only be replicated, not restored. Such replication would have a precarious tie to the original works ... Notre Dame can be rebuilt. With modern technology, it is entirely possible for the cathedral to be recreated with near-accuracy to the original. We can do this and keep the original building's spirit and feeling. **ABC News**

On first seeing it in the 1970s, I was enchanted by the Basilica of [St Paul Without the Walls](#) in Rome. It was some years later that I became aware that it had burned to the ground in 1823 and been completely rebuilt (refabricated?) into what we see today.

In r/keeping (both digital and non-digital), “original” means something. Quite what is still open to debate. I was taught to distinguish between conservation and restoration. Jenkinson said “add nothing to and take nothing from” and that the hand of the custodian must be visible. These are good maxims for those whose need is to see the original behind the work of enhancement and preservation. When we rebound ancient volumes at CAO, special care was taken to distinguish new leather from original binding and to add plates explaining what conservation work had been done. Originality was deemed to include not only content but also the physical features of a record. This made sense when the physical features gave testimony to the r/keeping (ask me sometime about the punch marks in the first 20 or so leaves of the

bound SA Naturalisation records). It has long been my view that, in our world, arrangement and description is the quintessential act of restoration.

In the digital world, transformation of content to meet technological requirements involves replication as well as preservation. We can authenticate the record using the tools developed to satisfy the functional requirements but the data is, in one sense, changed every time it is used. And at the moment when the record is opened and migrated to a new application, the testimony of the r/keeper provides an additional (necessary) proof of authenticity. How then do our views on originality and authenticity align with those set out in the article? We can probably say (though not all of us will be prepared to do so) that originality was always a means to an end rather than an end in itself. I once disgraced myself by saying that when you've seen one illuminated manuscript you've seen them all. But the weak-at-the-knees response to those artefacts is more about artistic merit than evidential value. Our evidential concerns raise issues that are particular to our *mystery* ("[secret rituals in which only certain people are allowed to take part](#)"), but r/keeping requirements for evidence, beyond the particularity with which we set out to meet them, can be aligned with the larger, shared goal of ensuring that the evidential values that records possess "are truthfully and credibly expressed." That's what we aim to do and we have our own particular way of doing it. <<[Andrew Waugh: Ahhh, the fetish of originality. As for recordkeeping, my understanding is that it had a legal basis: "the original is the best evidence" ... it was very difficult to ensure in court that nothing had been left out or added to a copy ... these issues largely disappeared with modern 'photographic' reproduction, and the law was eventually changed ... to permit the admission of copies. Judges now decide on the weight to be given the evidence \(which could be less if it was a copy\) ... \[but\] a host of other reasons have been raised to privilege the 'original'](#)

- The original has information not captured by the copying process ... a couple of years ago ... someone was using samples of vellum to discover things about medieval cattle ... Can't do ... that with a digitised copy.
- The original can be tested for authenticity. True, but will need to be applied to a vanishingly small number of records.
- ... We're never going to get a better copy than the original. True, but irrelevant to most of our records. As long as it's readable, no one is ever going to care about the quality of most of our records.
- The emotional impact of the original. Absolutely agree with this - for a small number of records ...
- The original is usually a stable copy that will keep for a long time with minimal resources applied to it. Absolutely agree - but this is not true for all material (nitrate film, tape). Nor are some records valuable enough to expend the resources involved in keeping the originals.

Questions of copies and originals are complex, and none of these reasons are reasons for keeping every original.>> In the 1990s, the lawyers went even further than Andrew suggests:

EVIDENCE ACT 1995 (NSW)- SECT 51

Original document rule abolished

51 Original document rule abolished

The principles and rules of the common law that relate to the means of proving the contents of documents are abolished.

Note : Section 182 of the Commonwealth Act gives the provisions of Part 2.2 of the Commonwealth Act a wider application in relation to Commonwealth records and certain Commonwealth documents.

Breath-taking. Over 700 years of common law wiped away at a stroke. The intention, as Andrew says, was that r/keeping tests be applied to establish the authenticity of documents tendered and the manner in which they were made and kept. The basic rule was that documentary evidence is inadmissible. The rules of documentary evidence are (or were) all, technically, exceptions to the hearsay rule. The weight of the exceptions became so great that they over-bore the hearsay rule and became (in effect) a part of the law of evidence.

PS. A specific rationale for some few original paper records, "not captured by copying" and available to be "tested", is the forensics – proof of a signature by examining pressure points on the paper, that sort of thing. Proof of signatures remains an issue but it falls within the r/keeping rules.

2019, May 29: Tugging at the Strings of Memory

Oral history (for the want of a better term) has many uses and gives rise to many dangers. At the [Center for Victims of Torture](#) it is mainly therapeutic, but it also provides powerful testimony witnessing atrocity. Mark Dapin's *Australia's Vietnam: Myth vs History* ([reviewed in last Saturday's SMH](#)) raises (according to the review by Tom Richardson) juicy issues around historical memory, sources, and interpretation that are central to our craft. It is an examination, inter alia, of "spit, verbal abuse, and red paint" told to the author by Australian veterans when he was reporting the war.

... It examines six popular myths that can be grouped into three categories: myths around national service; the myth that Australian soldiers committed certain types of war crimes in Vietnam; and the myth that Australian servicemen were shunned and often assaulted, verbally or physically, upon their return home ... this is a book about Australian Vietnam veterans that grapples with two basic questions: did the events some veterans describe actually happen? And if they didn't, why do we now think they did? ... The overall impression, Dapin notes, is that "organised protests were everywhere, unpoliced, uncontrollable and unreported, and young women would humiliate veterans in the most cruel ways imaginable". The contemporary record that Dapin unearths suggests a slightly different picture. It is not that these events never happened; it is that they were less common, or happened in different contexts, than is remembered today. There were very few clashes between veterans and protesters reported during the war, but when they did happen – as in Adelaide in May 1970 when soldiers from Woodside barracks attacked a Moratorium march – they were extremely well documented. There were protests at parades to welcome units home from Vietnam, but they were rare, and when they did occur the protesters were a tiny minority of those present. As Dapin points out, the fact that hundreds of thousands of Australians attended welcome-home parades throughout the country tells its own story about the complexities of support for the war – complexities that appear to have been forgotten in the years that have followed ...

Leaving aside precious hawing about the nature of Truth, this book confronts the value of memory "unsupported by the contemporary record": how do we know and understand the myths, how do we test their veracity, what resources do we use to sort out fact from fiction? Most confronting for us: Is the "contemporary record" more reliable than memory? Is memory more reliable, as reliable, or simply a useful or necessary corrective? Can a "contemporary record" be so partial, so skewered, so incomplete (especially as to the doings of the records-maker) that the oral recollections of other involved parties are a necessary counter-weight? And to what extent can memory be allowed to augment or impeach the "contemporary record"?

... Why then do we remember it differently today? Dapin draws on theories of historians such as Alistair Thomson and Alessandro Portelli to show how memories get rebuilt and conflated to help people make sense of what has happened to them. It leads Dapin into a wider assessment of historical truth and the value of oral history – a discussion that is unusually sophisticated for a work of popular history, yet is accessible for non-professionals ...

A book worth reading it would seem. A reporter who accepted oral testimony when it was contemporary has come to doubt its veracity and now questions "myths" to which it gave rise. He has tested this against documented sources. Has he arrived at Truth? Even if he hasn't, he is right to open the matter to question and to say why. We know that the nexus between documentation and Truth isn't altogether unproblematic, but that (as they say) is another story.

<<[Andrew Waugh](#): The answer to all these questions is, in my view, that the 'contemporary record' always needs to be treated with the greatest of care .., and can certainly be trumped by oral history. *Particularly* when the topic is sensitive in society, and the 'contemporary record' is produced by a particular segment of society. Look at anything to do with indigenous people in Australia. Look at the records of people in care. Look at the records relating to incidents of pedophilia in institutions...>> Oral evidence comes in many shapes and sizes (or, should that be many sounds and tones?) I now consistently use the term "involved parties" (borrowed from banking) to designate those whose testimony (oral or written) and whose participation in the evidence-formation process should be given weight similar to the "creator" so beloved of archivists and r/keepers (which has come to mean little more than the hand that formed the record rather than the complex tangle of entities participating in the action that the record documents). That is the threshold I've established for myself in defining parallel provenance, for example. Parallel

provenance can be conferred by involved parties – contemporary observers, later commentators, annalists, chroniclers, historians, etc. come second.

At law, documentary evidence is hearsay and (originally) inadmissible. Direct testimony was to be preferred, but the law relating to admissibility of documents gradually became a massive exception to the hearsay rule. We may take a larger view of evidence in research but the legal perspective is a useful corrective to placing too great a reliance on the written record. I'm amazed, Andrew, by the way, that you can't appreciate how contentious and sensitive railway enthusiasm can be (as a bit of a buff in that line myself, I assure you it is, and that no detail is trivial). As one who, while in Victoria, was the final arbiter for appraisals of railway records I am one of the saddest (and wisest) authorities on that point.

So, beyond the kind of evidence we are dealing with (oral, written, etc.) it is an evaluation of its circumstantial quality that matters. How good is this evidence? Not, it's written and therefore good/better (or vice versa). And the bottom line is that all evidence, of whatever kind, is impeachable - even scientific data. Deniers of climate change, for example, are wrong but they have legitimate claims about normalisation of the data that shouldn't just be swept aside with statements like "the science tells us ...". I agree that evidence can be found in many places and that it supports contested views. But it's how we handle impeached evidence that matters rather than making sweeping assertions about intrinsic qualities based on the type of evidence it is. I guess this is the "greatest of care" test, but it applies equally to oral evidence.

2019, May 30: <<[Peter Crush](#): Thank you Chris for this (involved parties) useful addition to the archival lexicon. >> Thank [you](#), Peter. That's the first feed-back I've ever had – positive or negative. You might be interested in what I had to say about "involved parties" in U 1.003.3 of [Hurley's Common Practice Manual](#) (HCPR) in the last release (2009). I was using the r/keeping metadata sets the government archives were all mad about at the time to derive applied examples for the three entity-types (Documents, Deeds, and Doers). The metadata mania seems to have subsided now, so I've done no further work but it was only ever intended as a conversation starter anyway. But the conversation never started (alas). Other examples might include: client, counsel, adviser, victim, beneficiary, adjudicator, mediator, arbiter, middleman, broker, judge, spokesman, pig-in-the-middle, innocent-bystander, policeman, enforcer, regulator Oh. the list could go on and on.

An Involved Party : An entity identified for conceptualisation purposes; it is the correspondent, loan guarantor, victim of government oppression, etc. Two applied entities are included here : the Social institution (RKMS) which seems to have elements of both an Agent and an Involved Party and an External Author (SARKMS) which is generally not the creator of the record in a recordkeeping process (albeit a crucial party to the creation of the documentary object). This entity is alluded to in order to demonstrate that not all entities of The Doer type will undertake the business being recorded or keep the records of it. Considerably more work needs to be done to clarify the concept of Involved Parties who have a more than passing interest in the records but do not actually participate in a transaction embodied in the record (e.g. the family formed by a stolen child grown to adulthood, the aggrieved landowner victimised by a corrupt planning application).

· **A Social Institution (duplicated under An Agent above)** : A sub-entity identified by RKMS; it is defined as institutions "associated" with Ambient Functions "in the sense of high level societal purposes". It is apparent that RKMS intends it to be a sub-entity of Agents but it is here duplicated under Involved Party because the relationship between an Organisation/Corporate body and a Social Institution will be superior/subordinate only when a Business Function is mandated (e.g. by a sovereign government to a governmental agency). It appears that RKMS has broader or at least different "associations" in mind that take the operation of Social Institutions outside the scope of the Agent entity (defined as the doer of business or recordkeeping actions).

· **An External Author** : A sub-entity identified by SARKMS; it is an "external" party responsible for the content of an Item.

· **A Regulator** : A sub-entity identified by HCPR; e.g. Australian Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) for financial services institutions in Australia.

- **A Lender** : A sub-entity identified by HCPR; e.g. the mortgager identified in a contract of sale between a vendor and a purchaser of land.
- **A Seller** : A sub-entity identified by HCPR; e.g. the seller of property under mortgage in a transaction between a mortgager and a mortgagee.
- **A Purchaser** : A sub-entity identified by HCPR; e.g. the buyer identified in a mortgage discharge transaction between a seller of mortgaged property and the mortgager.
- **A Guarantor** : A sub-entity identified by HCPR; e.g. a party standing guarantor in a loan transaction between a bank and a borrower.
- **A Reference Group** : A sub-entity identified by HCPR; e.g. a sociological concept referring to a group to which an individual or another group is compared.

2019, June 14: History vs Myth

Or is it history vs wishful thinking? [Story from the ABC](#). Will ABC now be raided by AHRC?

The AFL has adopted a new position on the origins of Australian football, now claiming it was influenced by Indigenous games. The change was spelt out in the [AFL's recent apology to Indigenous footballer Adam Goodes](#). The statement, attributed to the AFL's general manager of social policy and inclusion Tanya Hosch, said: "Aboriginal history tells us that traditional forms of football were played by Australia's first peoples all over Australia, most notably in the form of Marngrook. It is Australia's only Indigenous football game — a game born from the ancient traditions of our country." The ABC asked Ms Hosch for an interview to clarify whether the AFL believed there was an explicit link between the Indigenous football games, and the sport codified by Tom Wills and others in Melbourne in 1859. She declined the interview request, but in a statement said: "Marngrook, a high-marking game played in Victoria's western districts, pre-European settlement, undoubtedly influenced what we now understand as the modern AFL football code."

The AFL's new position is in direct contrast to the previous statements of the sport's origins. In 2008 — as part of Australian Rules football's 150th anniversary celebration — the AFL commissioned the historian, Gillian Hibbins, to write an essay on Australian football's origins in which she said the idea that Australian Rules football originated from Aboriginal games was "a seductive myth"... The AFL's new position has baffled some of the game's historians. Roy Hay has just published a book entitled *Aboriginal People and Australian Football in the Nineteenth Century*...Of the AFL's new position on the origins of the game, Mr Hay said, "That just simply is an attempt to rewrite history."

The central tenet of Hay's book is that Aboriginal people were playing Australian Rules Football, almost from its inception in the late 1850s...Mr Hay added that the AFL's apology to Goodes was "the cleverest piece of image management I've come across in a long time from the archetypical and best of the image managers: the AFL". In response, Ms Hosch said "all 18 clubs signed the statement. This is one of the strongest statements ever made by a sporting code concerning racism in our game and the history of our nation more broadly".

<<[Michael Piggott](#):...Hard to think of a more "Aussie" example, but if there is one, today's memorial service to ex-Prime Minister Bob Hawke reminds us of a contender. Hawke's [alleged] infamous naked drunken swim in the University House pool while a student at the ANU in 1957 was inevitably mentioned when the tributes started following his death on 16 May 2019...various iterations of the myth have been compared with the minutes of the disciplinary hearing, and show there is 99.9% certainty he did not. It's fully discussed in 'The File on H', chapter 5 of [Archives and Societal Provenance](#), and people can read without cost the key points, and see a reproduction of relevant minute with the words "Did not go in pool", at p 60 of [Prime Ministers at the Australian National University, An Archival Guide](#). Why even historians (eg the ANU's historian Dr Jill Waterhouse and the outgoing ANU Chancellor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC) keep repeating the myth I don't know, but as [Lisa Simpson](#) discovered researching Springfield's founder [Jebediah Springfield](#) - in fact a murderous pirate called Hans Sprungfeld - the temptations are strong.>> An [SBS story](#) from two years ago on the same topic (promoting the *Marngrook Footy Show on Thursdays at 7:30pm on NITV*) gives a very different slant.

... Marngrook was played with a ball made from possum skin, filled with charcoal and tied with kangaroo-tail sinew ... one of the major elements of the game was kicking the ball high into the air, then leaping to catch it, which some historians say inspired the marks of AFL...Protector of Aborigines in Victoria Richard Thomas wrote down his observations of the game in 1841, saying, "The men and boys joyfully assembl

when this game is to be played. One makes a ball of possum skin, somewhat elastic, but firm and strong. The players of this game do not throw the ball as a white man might do, but drop it and at the same time kicks it with his foot. The tallest men have the best chances in this game. Some of them will leap as high as five feet from the ground to catch the ball. The person who secures the ball kicks it.”

... Tom Wills was raised as the only white kid in his area, and is said to have played with the Indigenous children on his dad’s property, speaking their language and presumably joining in their games. Although there has been some back and forth on whether the Indigenous game would have been played (a) in the area and (b) before Wills went over to England for schooling, the recent discovery of Mukjarrawaint man Johnny Connolly’s personal recollections in the State Library of Victoria seem to suggest it was. In [Meanjin Quarterly](#), Jenny Hocking and Nell Reidy also pointed to the contents of an unpublished letter from Wills to his brother Horace, in which it’s clear the local game was not merely a straight adaptation of British rugby, but shared marngrook’s focus on keeping the ball in the air. “[T]he adaptations made in the new game of Australian football was a matter of geography - that the grounds were too hard for rugby, in which players were routinely thrown to the ground. The game then had to be adapted to keep the players and the play off the ground... Wills’ cousin Colden Harrison also recalled this potential for injury as central to the game’s early form, that Wills considered rugby ‘unsuitable’ for working men who needed to stay fit for work as well as for cricket.”...In [a 2008 article for The Monthly](#), John Hirst discussed sports historian Gillian Hibbins’ then-recent rejection of the idea. In *The Australian Game of Football Since 1858*, she dismissed the notion as a “seductive myth”, concluding, “Understandably, the appealing idea that Australian football is a truly Australian native game recognising the Indigenous people, rather than deriving solely from a colonial dependence upon the British background, has been uncritically embraced and accepted in some places.”

I would have thought that the AFL, instead of defending its new position by saying it was supported by 18 football clubs, had simply said the matter is disputed amongst historians.

2019, June 17: Real vs Fake

A [Guardian article](#) re-visits earlier List themes about authenticity, originality, objectivity, dogma, populism, and the legacy of postmodernism. How typical that they are looking at digital solutions to digital fakery. As the article points out, however, deep fakes’ “greatest strength is not technological, but our willingness to believe and click “share” for any old nonsense so long as it fits in with our pre-existing views about the world” – exactly the enslavement to Dogma that Acton warned against. Willingness to believe is the evil that r/keeping analysis (forensics, context, structure, evidentiary processes) ought to be good at debunking. Context, not content, rules. I suppose “looking for unusual arm gesticulation” might count as r/keeping forensics.

We are entering an age in which you can no longer trust your ears or eyes. Bots, trolls and fake news merchants have demolished the idea that you can believe what you read online. But audio and video always felt like truth’s life raft, offering an accurate portrayal of reality we could cling to. Not for much longer. Forget post-truth, this is the era of post-reality, where “[deep fake](#)” software will allow anyone to create believable video footage of anyone saying anything ... In some ways, deep fakes aren’t all that new: the selective editing and clipping of real footage to create a falsehood, a “shallow fake”, you could say, is already the staple of conspiracy theorists and even the odd respectable news outlet. And large-scale political fakery is as old as the hills: your grandparents might remember the “[Zinoviev letter](#)”, a 1924 forgery published by the *Daily Mail* that was purportedly from the Soviet Comintern, asking the British Communist party to engage in sedition.

The difference now is that it is cheaper, easier, quicker and done far better ... The possibilities are especially dangerous in countries with existing ethnic or religious tensions and less experience in dealing with digital literacy. In India, simple faked images and videos of alleged child kidnappings have led to lynchings, while in Gabon rumours about a deep fake video of President Ali Bongo created a political crisis ... There is already a counter-movement: academic conferences, the US military and Facebook researchers are all involved in an arms race, trying to build fraud-spotting tech. (Literally in some cases: one technique involves looking for unusual arm gesticulation.) This is vital work – perhaps the most important technological task of the next 10 years – but it’s only part of the answer. Deep fakes’ greatest strength is not technological, but our willingness to believe and click “share” for any old nonsense so long as it fits in with our pre-existing views about the world. You might assume that deep fakes mean everyone will believe everything they see, but the real risk to democracy is the opposite: no one will believe anything at all ... The main effect of deep

fakes in our politics therefore will not be to spread lies, but, rather, confusion and apathy. Authoritarians here and abroad must be thrilled. Over the past few years, they have developed a new technique of censorship by distraction, smothering truths under a torrent of meaningless rubbish. They will soon be able to do this automatically, pumping out millions or even billions of pieces of content to keep everyone suitably confused.

As the political scientist Hannah Arendt wrote in the 1950s, the ideal subject of an authoritarian regime is not a committed Nazi or Bolshevik, but someone for whom “the distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, no longer exists”, because they are far more malleable. The health of democracies all over the world will depend on finding ways to re-establish the veracity of video and audio content – and temper our own willingness to believe or disbelieve according to our own prejudices. And if we can't? In the face of constant and endless deep fakes and deep denials, the only rational response from the citizen will be extreme cynicism and apathy about the very idea of truth itself. They will conclude that nothing is to be trusted except her own gut instinct and existing political loyalties. In other words, the age of deep fakes might even succeed in making today's visceral and divided politics look like a golden age of reasonableness.

2020, January 4: What is Truth?

... said jesting Pilate. Sometimes I despair about the methodology(ies) or lack thereof used (or displayed at any rate) in thinking about r/keeping. I guess we qualify as a social science and I have supposed that the natural and formal sciences display more rigour. A [report](#) in *Nature* about reproducibility suggests that they have their problems too. It's never too late, however. to learn how to learn.

More than 70% of researchers have tried and failed to reproduce another scientist's experiments, and more than half have failed to reproduce their own experiments. Those are some of the telling figures that emerged from *Nature's* survey of 1,576 researchers who took a brief online questionnaire on reproducibility in research ... The results capture a confusing snapshot of attitudes around these issues, says Arturo Casadevall, a microbiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland. “At the current time there is no consensus on what reproducibility is or should be.” But just recognizing that is a step forward, he says. “The next step may be identifying what is the problem and to get a consensus.”

Failing to reproduce results is a rite of passage, says Marcus Munafo, a biological psychologist at the University of Bristol, UK, who has a long-standing interest in scientific reproducibility. When he was a student, he says, “I tried to replicate what looked simple from the literature, and wasn't able to. Then I had a crisis of confidence, and then I learned that my experience wasn't uncommon.” ... Being at the cutting edge of science means that sometimes results will not be robust, says Munafo. “We want to be discovering new things but not generating too many false leads.” ... When work does not reproduce, researchers often assume there is a perfectly valid (and probably boring) reason. What's more, incentives to publish positive replications are low and journals can be reluctant to publish negative findings [but] Acceptance was more common than persistent rejection ...

One-third of respondents said that their labs had taken concrete steps to improve reproducibility within the past five years ... Irakli Loladze, a mathematical biologist at Bryan College of Health Sciences in Lincoln, Nebraska, estimates that efforts to ensure reproducibility can increase the time spent on a project by 30%, even for his theoretical work. He checks that all steps from raw data to the final figure can be retraced. But those tasks quickly become just part of the job. “Reproducibility is like brushing your teeth,” he says. “It is good for you, but it takes time and effort. Once you learn it, it becomes a habit.”

... Respondents were asked to rate 11 different approaches to improving reproducibility in science, and all got ringing endorsements. Nearly 90% — more than 1,000 people — ticked “More robust experimental design” “better statistics” and “better mentorship”. Those ranked higher than the option of providing incentives (such as funding or credit towards tenure) for reproducibility-enhancing practices ... “It's healthy that people are aware of the issues and open to a range of straightforward ways to improve them,” says Munafo ...

2020, May 28: Fact vs Opinion – is there a difference?

[Fact](#) (something that is [known](#) to have [happened](#) or to [exist](#))

[Opinion](#) (a belief or attitude ... that isn't necessarily based on facts)

Leaving aside whether such a distinction is even meaningful, we say that records are not just carriers of facts and opinions, they are also testimony. Beyond curating, preserving, and disclosing them, our endeavour is to offer a surety about them, not for the truth of the testimony they provide but for its authenticity. That requires that we witness their inviolability and communicate our understanding of the circumstances surrounding the testimony (something that is so often obscured in legal proceedings) and to do that successfully we must be trusted because the understanding we wish to communicate (an understanding not of the content but of the surrounding circumstances) cannot be found on the face of the record. Our very existence, in a post-Truth environment, depends on this.

When Jenkinson said that archivists are servants of truth, he did not mean the truth of what is in the records but the truth about what they are, how they came to be, and why they are inviolate. Ian Opperman says trust us to gather and use the data ethically and (by implication) that this is plausible because in order to be useful it has to be true. Donald Trump says that opinions cannot be trusted if they are not ideologically balanced, by which he seems to mean agreeable to him. In both cases, reliance is placed on the **intentions** of those involved. That is why we must be clear about [our methods](#) and [our intentions](#), inter alia –

to preserve and protect the authenticity of records ... by documenting their creation and use ... to preserve the intellectual and physical integrity of those records ... [and] ... to promote open and equitable access ...

That puts us closer to the data scientist (trust us because of how we intend to handle the information) than the politician (trust us because of what we believe). Of course, how we choose to handle the information (even supposing we can be trusted to do what we say) is itself based on a belief.

Case One: [Trusting Us](#)

If nothing else, COVID-19 has given many Australians a preview of a future where we are driven by data-driven decision-making ... Governments are using a range of data to control and map the virus ... Interestingly, this increased use of data and surveillance is being accepted by the wider community at present because their willingness to do so is being tilted by the pandemic ... NSW Chief Data Scientist Ian Opperman says the community's threshold for this enhanced use of data may change in the opposite direction once the worst is over so now is the time to get it right. "We need to be saying that even in a crisis, even a pandemic, we will spend time building trust, ensuring privacy, being transparent, behaving ethically, and being demonstrable about it," Opperman says.

New South Wales Minister for Customer Service Victor Dominello says "the best way to bring the public along is through results". "We realise now that we cannot solve complex problems such as a pandemic with voodoo. Data must be at the centre of decision-making Dominello believes Covid-19 has seen us "cross the Rubicon" in terms of health and when it comes to technologies such as e-health and telehealth, we've been given a glimpse into the future earlier than expected... Dominello believes the first wave of change will mostly revolve around customer experience and more personalised health. "We're already seeing that through the uptake of wearable devices. Eventually we may see implantable devices if people want to go down that path and see it as the best way to optimise their health. "Ultimately though, everything comes back to data ... **Sponsored** by Australian Computer Society

Case Two: [Mistrusting Others](#)

Donald Trump has threatened to "strongly regulate" or close down social media platforms that do not meet his standards for ideological balance, a day after Twitter, for the first time, slapped a warning label on a pair of Trump tweets spreading lies about mail-in voting ... Trump in the past has made threats about media censorship that he did not then act on, and any attempt by the White House to shutter a media organization would encounter robust first amendment challenges in the courts. In 2018 a federal judge ruled the president could not block people on Twitter, because it violates their first amendment rights to participate in a "public forum".

As his election-year polling numbers have deteriorated, however, Trump has grown increasingly wild in his threats against media organizations and the voting system, and more aggressive in removing mechanisms for oversight in the federal government and in installing loyalists. His takeover of the federal

courts could put future first amendment claims on new and dangerous ground ... In the past, Trump has praised Twitter for allowing him to take his message directly to followers, and despite his claims of being "silenced", social media platforms have been a boon for Trump. His current campaign has rebuilt a targeted advertising operation on Facebook that was widely credited with helping Trump win in 2016. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter were – and are – staging grounds for foreign propaganda campaigns meant to scramble and empoison US politics and society. Those campaigns have also been credited with helping Trump's 2016 victory ...

The federal government has in the past attempted to enforce ideological balance for broadcast television, where licenses are controlled by the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC enforced a "fairness doctrine" for 40 years after the second world war, and still enforces an equal-time rule requiring stations to give competing political candidates the opportunity for equal exposure.

2020, May 29

<<**Mark Brogan:** It's true that reproducibility of results is an important test for scientific research. But whether the results of a failed attempt at reproduction poses problems for the efficacy of theory, depends on the nature and consequences of the failure. For example, taking into account that much scientific research is empirical and statistical, a finding relative to an hypothesis that a result is consistent at $\alpha = 0.001$ or $\alpha = 0.05$ confidence interval describes two different confidence levels for the likelihood that the result could be attributed to chance. If experiment A produces significance at 0.001 and experiment B at 0.05, the results are different and the result from B may said not to have reproduced A, but 0.05 is still sufficient to be consistent with acceptance of an hypothesis. There are many more examples of this in the scientific literature. The consequences of non-reproducibility is the thing. There are many reasons in naturalistic settings as well as laboratory settings, why results may not be reproducible that don't involve fudging.>> I took the *Nature* report not to be about scientific reproduction as such but about the attitudes of scientists towards it – viz. a report on their professional values - "a confusing snapshot of attitudes ... no consensus on what reproducibility is or should be ... The next step may be identifying what is the problem and to get a consensus"

On the one hand – indifference and denial

... incentives to publish positive replications are low and journals can be reluctant to publish negative findings [but] Acceptance was more common than persistent rejection ... efforts to ensure reproducibility can increase the time spent on a project by 30%

On the other hand – a thirst to do it better

One-third of respondents said that their labs had taken concrete steps to improve reproducibility within the past five years ... "Reproducibility is like brushing your teeth ... It is good for you, but it takes time and effort. Once you learn it, it becomes a habit." ... "It's healthy that people are aware of the issues and open to a range of straightforward ways to improve them"

2020, January 19: "We made a mistake" The National Archives said ...

<<**Michael Piggott:** *Washington (CNN)*The National Archives on Saturday apologized and said it removed from display a 2017 photograph of the Women's March it had altered to censor signs referencing women's anatomy and President Donald Trump's name. "We made a mistake," the National Archives said on Twitter, acknowledging that it had obscured some words from protest signs seen in the image. The Archives said it will replace it with an unaltered image "as soon as possible."...>> The article on NA(US) continues beyond the facts as set out in Michael's quote and deals with the question of why the images were doctored

... the National Archives said the decision "as a non-partisan, non-political federal agency" to blur Trump's name was to avoid engaging in "current political controversy." The National Archives told the newspaper it obscured the references to women's genitals because the museum gets a lot of young visitors and the words could be seen as inappropriate ... the National Archives does not alter "images or documents that are displayed as artifacts in exhibitions." National Archive officials did not respond to [a] request for any examples of previous times when the museum edited photos or documents to avoid political controversy.

On Twitter, before the National Archives' apology, former national security adviser Susan Rice called the alteration "disturbing." "The National Archives is now whitewashing history ..." Rudy Mehrbani, senior

counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice, also tweeted earlier Saturday that the National Archives "created political controversy in attempting to avoid it." "By erasing women's voices, you insult the suffrage movement & minimize the response to Trump's actions & election," Mehrbani, also a veteran of the Obama White House, said.

One wonders if the controversy is about tampering with the integrity of the images or the fact that what was removed expressed sentiments congenial to the critics. The alteration (any alteration) is indefensible, but what if the sign said: "God hates fags!" This harks back to earlier discussion on this List about the handling of toxic assets.

<<**Michael Piggott: Project Alpha is about The National Archives envisaging what we would create if we were to start completely anew with our website, as part of our new strategy, *Archives for Everyone*. We have some big, interesting, challenges. With 34 million descriptions of records, our [online catalogue](#) is vast and it is easy for people to feel lost. Not everyone who might benefit from the archive has a well-formed research question or knows how to use our services. The experience can feel intimidating and confusing.**>> The handling and description of records unavoidably involves a degree of interpretation and mediation. The old books warn us against it so far as possible, but online access changes all that. First, our audience is now vastly different and their expectations are not (for the most part) those of the scholar. Second, online searching involves opportunities for proactive interrogation of descriptive data (along with digital content) to which we have been too slow to adapt.

NA(UK) is right to identify the problem and to set about doing something but I got nothing from their puff piece about what, in concrete terms, they want to achieve. Too early, you say. Well, yes and no. It sounds like they'll be employing skills developed in other fields while accepting that our stuff is different. So far so good. At the beginning of their journey, you can't know (at one level) where it will lead. But strategically where it leads will depend upon the guiding principles which are not technical at all – impartiality, authenticity, reliability, contextuality, structure, and so on. Principles we have valued up to now and should go on valuing. Principles nicely illustrated in the piece about NA(US) and matters about which we need to have clear views as we develop our methodologies in uncharted waters.

2020, March 3: The public record

I hate the fact that reliable sources of information are becoming fewer and harder to find. Governments are resisting access, prosecuting whistleblowers who expose their lies, raiding journalists who tell the truth, and passing laws that narrow our freedoms in the name of security. Post-Truth lies and evasions are so plentiful we no longer seem to care. Meanwhile, the once reliable (sort-of) news media is in sharp decline. The NewsCorp stable is a disgrace and the Fairfax outlets (that were) are downsizing and are becoming more reliant on others to provide their copy. Thank God for the ABC. Though even there [the idea of political bias](#) (not the kind the NewsCorp Nasties like to bloviate about but something else) is not unbelievable. Now [AAP is closing its doors](#). Sad day.

News agency Australian Associated Press will close in June after major shareholders Nine Entertainment and News Corp Australia walked away from the wire service after 85 years ... "It is a great loss that professional and researched information provided by AAP is being substituted with the un-researched and often inaccurate information that masquerades as real news on the digital platforms," [AAP Chairman Campbell] Reid, who is News Corp's group executive corporate affairs, told staff at a meeting in the Sydney newsroom.

... The loss of the news wire will have a major impact on public interest journalism and the coverage of local courts, as well as regional and rural news ... Founded in 1935 by Keith Murdoch, AAP has been providing news organisations big and small with daily news, information and photographs produced by a pool of around 200 journalists. But the arrival of digital search engines, aggregators and social media platforms has had an increasingly detrimental impact on AAP, compounded by the recent merger of Fairfax Media and Nine Entertainment.

... In 2018 AAP lost 10% of its journalists in a major cull, with executives blaming the digital platforms Google and Facebook for cannibalising their service. The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance said an independent non-partisan news source was vital. "For 85 years, AAP has provided important, reliable reporting of courts, politics, sport, general news and photography to a diverse range of subscribers including

regional and metropolitan newspapers, websites and broadcasters,” the MEAA house committee for AAP said.

Newspapers (and more recently radio & TV news programmes) have been a part of the record of events we are dedicated to preserving. What do we think of Google and Twitter as the alternatives? Except perhaps as testimony to fear and madness in crowds? For every useful web site there are dozens more that are dotty and dangerous – unrebutted and uncorrected. How are we to know?

<<**Joanna Sassoon: ...while on the theme, I was struck by [this article on the ABC](#) where the newspaper clippings were acknowledged as such a valuable source - particularly as the events of interest occurred in the post-digital era and so not on Trove, thereby involving costly research..>>**

2020, May 24: And now for some [good news](#)

... A consortium of philanthropists, media executives and “impact investors” has lodged a bid to rescue AAP and about 500 journalist jobs, ahead of the newswire’s scheduled closure next month ... It is understood the bid is the only viable proposal to keep AAP from closing, but its shareholders – Nine, News Corp and Seven West Media – have yet to accept any offer.

... AAP is scheduled to close next month. News Corp has already announced plans to [launch an internal news wire service](#).

... In a statement released on Sunday, [bidders] said their aim was to preserve media diversity and ensure ongoing coverage of court reporting, regional news and regional sport.

It’s not yet a done deal and it sounds like it may not be the Full Monty, but fingers crossed anyway.

2020, August 10: [An early example of fake news frolics?](#)

It is one of the earliest examples of a politician accusing the media of fake news. And it illustrates that, despite having been a journalist himself, Winston Churchill had an ambivalent relationship with the press, praising it on occasions, attacking it on others. Churchill had been incensed by a picture published on the back page of the *Daily Herald* on 4 June 1929, that showed him outside 11 Downing Street carrying a book with the title *War* clearly visible. The caption suggested that war was “one of his favourite subjects”. Churchill insisted the photograph was a fake and ordered Edward Marsh, his private secretary, to write to the *Herald’s* editor, William Mellor, expressing his outrage...

[Churchill’s] refusal to back down when proven wrong is reminiscent of today’s politicians who label criticism as ‘fake news’. The book Churchill was photographed with was in fact a recently published anti-war novel. It appears he casually picked a copy up and had forgotten ever having done so. Churchill declined to apologise for his wrongful allegation and merely thanked the *Herald* for its “assurance” that the photograph had not been tampered with...

Churchill ... had issued orders that the War Office was no longer to accommodate the *Herald’s* journalists because their paper published “propaganda of an essentially disloyal and subversive character” ...

<<**John Waddington: Going a little back before Winston’s time, Thomas Jefferson clearly didn’t much trust newspapers either. Writing to newspaper editor John Norvell in 1807 he [reportedly said](#): "It is a melancholy truth, that a suppression of the press could not more completely deprive the nation of its benefits, than is done by its abandoned prostitution to falsehood. Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle. ... I will add, that the man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them; inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods & errors..."**>>

2020, August 11:

For there shall be a time when they will not endure sound doctrine but, according to their own desires, they will heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears. And will indeed turn away their hearing from the truth, but will be turned unto fables. (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

An even earlier example tells us (as if we didn’t know already) that untruth works when people believe it. As Mr Lincoln put it, you can fool some of the people all of the time. In 44 BC [Caesar’s assassination](#) unleashed -

... an unprecedented disinformation war in which the combatants deployed poetry and rhetoric to assert the righteousness of the respective campaigns ... Commenting on the war, the eminent ancient historian Ronald Syme, author of the classic 1939 book, *The Roman Revolution*, observed that “of the facts there is and was no authentic record”. Octavian’s official version of events decreed that “a degenerate Roman was

striving to subvert the liberties of the Roman people to subjugate Italy and the west under the rule of an oriental queen". Everyone knew the account was fraudulent but it was still enough to consolidate Octavian's rule and open the door to his reinvention as Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. Fake news had allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all.

2020, November 17: Trump, records and the Presidential Records Act

<<[Andrew Waugh: Excellent long article in the New Yorker about Trump's attitude to recordkeeping, his insistence on non-disclosure agreements, and deliberate destruction of records in contravention of the PRA. The article includes a summary of the history of Presidential recordkeeping and how NARA has tried to protect such records.](#)>> Now, here's a question. Does anyone care but us whose trade this is? A few political insiders perhaps who want the documentary basis for their work to be regulated, some journalists in search of a gotcha moment or good copy, the public when titillated momentarily by scandals involving records and politicians, and some historians and scholars (fewer perhaps than we sometimes imagine) who care about the integrity of political and historical discourse. Was any public (non-specialist) interest shown in the recent (apparently unsuccessful) fight to preserve the integrity of State Records NSW in which we couldn't even rely on a world-leading authority on recordkeeping to uphold the right? In short, who cares? Who even understands? And what does that mean for our future?

Thumping Trump is part of the narrative that post-Trump we may have a shot at getting back to "normal". This is not unlike the wishful thinking that post-Covid we'll snap back to the way things were. In my world view, things are never the way they were (and, as the old joke has it, they never were the way they were). We've been trying for a long time to plant in the public mind that routine good recordkeeping is an important bolster for good governance (corporate and political). We've not had a lot of success but I'm open to the argument that our audience is opinion-makers and influencers rather than the "general". If we now aspire to resume that work in a post-Trump era, it behoves us to take a realistic view on what that era will look like.

First question: Politically incorrect idea. Is this (was it always) a Western Liberal concern? Do Asian, African, and Middle Eastern societies share it? Is the situation uniform in Western Liberal space (excluding Russia, I suppose)? There are obvious differences, but the US is important because of its dominance (for the moment) of the Western Liberal space. But populism (for want of a better word) has infected most of us. I have long thought that Hanson-ism is our version of Trump-ism.

Second question: How much of a problem is it? I've seen research that about 50% of those who voted for Trump are bolted on Trump-supporters (probably Tea Party sympathisers) while the other 50% support the Republican Party rather than Trump. Since he got just under 50% of the vote, that suggests that 25% of the American electorate is part of a populist uprising. You can reach more-or-less the same conclusion about the UK over the Brexit vote (erroneously said to "prove" the British wanted to leave): When you do the math, the result is that more-or-less 30% voted to leave, 30% to stay, and 30% were too lazy or indifferent to vote at all.

On this reasoning, we are now in a situation in which up to a third of the "general" public are wedded to populism. Are they likely to care about recordkeeping? The question is moot, of course, if history suggests that the "general" public – whatever its composition – don't care anyway. Although I don't share Biden's hopes that we have a shot at getting back to the way things were, I think we should continue to struggle for our cause and that means we have to be aware of the changing landscape in which we operate.

I have recently read two interpretations of what has been happening in the US. [Jon Meacham](#) argues that today's populist uprising is just another example of furies that have arisen from time to time in the US and that (like those) it will subside. This is a kind of comforting, cyclical interpretation suggesting that snap-back will occur. But Meacham's analysis is more subtle than that: he goes on to argue that these periodic outbursts derive from abiding fault lines in American society going back to colonial times. Theodore H White, writing in *Making of the President 1968*, seems to be arguing that it was in [that year](#) that the US passed a watershed moment that fractured the US body politic, arguably forever. He puts it down to three things: loss of faith in government attendant on Vietnam, the LA Watts riots of 1965,

and the Chicago riots at the Democratic Convention. This implies a linear view focusing on a point in time at which the voiceless began to be alienated. He writes:

For Americans, a time of rethinking had begun [after the Tet Offensive]. Had the government deceived its people? Or had the government deceived itself? And, in either case, whom could one trust? ... For months the White House had known of a coming crisis in South Vietnam ... The President had secretly acted on this information [but] All through the fall ... a series of happy stories was told ... Were there no outside world, if America inhabited a satellite planet, capable of controlling its own environment ... Lyndon Johnson might conceivably have gone down as the greatest of twentieth-century Presidents. But ... one of the cardinal duties of the President is to educate, not only himself, but his people ... He must understand not only the history of his own people as they change, but the history of other peoples as they too, change about us. A President can trust no one and no theology except his own sense of history; all instruments of government must be subordinate to this feeling of his for history; and when this supreme guidance is lacking, the instruments themselves are useless ... by the beginning of the year 1968 the instruments of American government had failed American purpose as never before ...

[After Watts] Americans, black and white, would search for new terms of partnership ... but underlying all such phrases ... was the new recognition of rage, of hate, of fear, of barbarisms that might tear America itself apart ... It is impossible to understand any of the domestic politics of the United States ... without understanding how deeply, beneath surface euphemisms, goes the cleavage of race ... It was to be a long time before Americans realised that these were not just episodes of the day ... but ... cleavage lines that would split all Americans apart ...

In 1965, and for the next three years, the gusts of history that swept through America were to stir and shake every value that middle-class Protestant America had cherished for centuries ... Somewhere out beyond the Alleghenies the old culture of America still persists [but] a new culture ... the child of prosperity and the past decade ... defines itself best not by what it seeks but by its contempt and scorn of what the past has taught ... the critical difference between the two cultures is that the new culture dominates the heights of national communications ... and thus stains, increasingly, the prisms of reporting through which the nation as a whole must see itself ...

Those who take a partisan view of the current US situation (it's all the fault of Nixon, Reagan, Bush 2, and Trump) forget that it was Clinton who arguably took the decisive step in launching the GFC by [repealing the Glass-Steagall Act](#) and Obama who (having promised to visit retribution on those responsible for the GFC) forgave them and [appointed many](#) of them to positions of power in his administration to help [reform Wall Street](#).

It has been argued that it was the GFC that was responsible above all else for the rise of Tea Party populism. That and the hollowing out of the American middle class (Meacham quotes a statistic showing that the income level needed to support an American middle-class lifestyle, comparable to what it was in the 50s and 60s is now twice the actual average income in the US). Not forgetting that it has been the parallel hollowing out of middle management (those primarily responsible for recordkeeping) that has brought us to where we are now, cherishing the forlorn hope that technology will make up for the void.

These are not transitory problems, they are abiding features of the world in which we now live and in which we must promote, if we can, the recordkeeping enterprise. If you think Biden's hope for snap-back (however laudable) is realistic, read what [Stan Grant](#) has to say-

... don't think for a minute Trump is an aberration — or that he invented the lie. America's lies are baked in ... it didn't begin with Trump. The US was born with the power lie, with the invasion and genocide of First Nations people, the enslavement of Africans on whose scarred backs America built its economy

Barack Obama ran a "remote killing" operation using drones to target terrorists. But he went much further than that, ordering strikes in countries like Pakistan outside declared war zones. His drone strikes killed many innocent people. Obama used state-secrets privilege to keep the attacks classified and away from public scrutiny. American media outlets like the New York Times and The Atlantic gained access to material that revealed Obama's complicity and secrecy and that the Obama administration lied about the death tolls

...

Donald Trump has lied like so many American presidents before him; his handling of the coronavirus shows that, just like with other leaders, his lies cost lives. America has survived its worst presidents and its history of lies. In spite of it all it has been a remarkable country. Its promise of hope has lured people from all around the world, chasing their dreams. Yet today that hope looks more like another lie.

President-elect Joe Biden is peddling his own myth about a land of "possibilities" that tens of millions of Americans gave up on a long time ago. Economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton chronicle this downward spiral in their book, *Deaths of Despair*. It is a devastating portrait of a lost generation; an America of 'haves-and-have-nots', where a four-year college degree is not just the difference between career prospects but between life and death. This is an America of meaningless or no work, declining wages and shattered families. Harvard University philosopher Michael Sandel reveals in his latest book a country in which the rich get richer and the poor stay where they are. The richest one per cent, Sandel points out, earn more than the bottom half combined. If you're born poor, you likely stay poor. Of those in the bottom fifth of the income scale, Sandel says, "only about one in 20 will make it to the top fifth". But Biden and Kamala Harris say you can make it if you try.

Harris points to her black, Indian and immigrant background — she will become the first female vice-president — as proof of the American Dream. But Harris is the daughter of solidly middle-class parents who are university academics. She never had to "make it". Now Harris's husband Doug Emhoff — a wealthy partner in a prestigious law firm — is reportedly in line for a White House job. Just like Trump's family, just like the Clintons, the Bushes and the Obamas: more power and privilege passed around like presents under a Christmas tree. Little wonder so many Americans see Washington politics as a racket that serves the wealthy. The poor and left-behind are not fooled. Americans know too well the lies their presidents tell while they have to live with the devastating, sad truth of their own lives.

2020, November 19:

"...a new culture...the child of prosperity and the past decade...defines itself best not by what it seeks but by its contempt and scorn of what the past has taught...the critical difference between the two cultures is that the new culture dominates the heights of national communications...and thus stains, increasingly, the prisms of reporting through which the nation as a whole must see itself..." (T H White)

But not for long. Fox News and Donald Trump gave the old culture back its voice, said for them what they'd been unable to articulate for themselves – hadn't dared to articulate in the face of the contempt and the scorn. In short, Fox and Trump gave them back their freedom, and people thus liberated won't give that up easily. Why should they? And in the process a great divide opened when the Right sought to enlist the reanimated old culture and then became its prisoner.

I agree with [Jan-Werner Muller](#) that the divide is unlikely to go away (but not for the reason given – viz. that polarisation is confected, not real). What has been lost (or, at least, severely damaged) is the habit and norms of cultural and social discourse. And they have been lost in reality not in imagination. We cannot understand the divide (here as well as in America and, I suspect, throughout the Western Liberal world) if we fail to understand that it is not a right-wing plot or a passing frost but a thing that stems as much from the contempt and the scorn White identifies as from the stridency of the reaction to that. Even now, that reaction is being fed by the Left's tolerance for riots and excess in the name of BLM and their intolerant suppression of ideas and speech and behaviour in the name of ideological purity. The returning Democrats, some of them, [believing themselves triumphant](#) are behaving like the returning Bourbons, having learned nothing and forgotten nothing.

I am finding it increasingly difficult to believe that the values that (I think) underscore the recordkeeping gospel (and the archival mission for that matter) are in fact accepted by the society in which we preach that gospel - are, in fact, accepted by many recordkeepers themselves anymore.

- The old culture has come to believe (if Stan Grant is correct) that government and corporations are a "racket" and there are some grounds for thinking they are right. Why should they believe recordkeeping can keep the racket honest?
- The new culture may pay lip service to integrity, fairness, and freedom but understands those things through an ideological prism as [outcomes rather than values](#) (shades of [Jordan](#)

[Peterson](#) – remember him? The man [too dangerous](#) to be heard). Why should they believe that recordkeeping is anything but a tool to forward an agenda?

In our confused cultural landscape, the traditional recordkeeping message seems to have the best chance of success as part of a [values-based](#) approach to governance (corporate and political) – the way things were (or the way we like to think they were). But that seems increasingly unattainable (unless Meacham is correct and this too will pass of its own accord). Joe Biden wants things to get back to normal. So, what would I do to help him bring this about? I would ask how we strayed from normal. I would ask how we can get back. But I'm [Bethmann-Holweg](#) on this, I'm afraid. When asked how WW1 came about, he is said to have replied: "Ah! Well. If only one knew"

PS. My only comfort is that our divide here in Oz doesn't seem to be as deep as elsewhere. But perhaps I delude myself.

2020, November 11: What the data proves (and doesn't) – be careful how you use it

[Show me the proof](#)

The independent senator Rex Patrick has questioned how Services Australia calculates welfare debts and called on the government to fund a federal court test case to examine the agency's methods ... His call comes after the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) found a \$1,600 debt issued to one of Patrick's constituents had "not been proved" ... [The federal government is facing a class action](#) over the robodebt program, which averaged out annual tax office pay information to allege welfare recipients had been overpaid on a fortnightly basis. After admitting the practice was unlawful, the government [agreed to repay \\$721m](#) and said it would issue debts only after it had gathered sufficient "proof points" to substantiate the overpayment. However, the agency has not clarified which "additional proof points" – such as payslips or bank statements – could justify a debt, including the more than 180,000 debts it has declined to refund ...

Under social security rules, welfare recipients are required to report their employment income on a fortnightly basis to ensure they are not overpaid benefits. At issue is that in some cases the payslips relied on by Services Australia to subsequently calculate debts do not align with the agency's fortnightly income reporting periods. Further, beneficiaries are required to report their income when it is "earned", rather than paid to them. In some cases, it is said the agency will use an average to match the income on the person's payslips to [Centrelink](#) reporting periods. It is argued this process could lead to inaccurate or unproven debts, if averaged income was attributed to the wrong fortnight. It would be most likely to affect casual workers with very "lumpy" income and particularly those engaged as contractors and paid irregularly or belatedly for past work.

"In principle, the idea is, you can't just raise a debt, you have to be able to prove the debt," Patrick told Senate estimates last month ...

[Whoops!](#)

The head of the National Broadband Network has blamed poor address records for having to spend an extra \$600 million to complete the rollout. The organisation celebrated finishing the initial build by the Government's deadline of July, but has discovered an extra 300,000 homes and business that still require connection. Chief executive Stephen Rue told a Senate hearing on Monday evening that money for the new connections would come from additional funds the organisation has borrowed. "As we got to the end of the build, we found there were more premises to build to than the data showed. Believe it or not, there actually wasn't a database of all the premises in Australia," he told Labor senator Kimberley Kitching. "We relied on historic databases, which we imported." ...

Mr Rue said NBN Co received data from Telstra as part of the historic agreement signed in 2011, as well as from data provider PSMA. PSMA Australia CEO Dan Paull said criticism of his organisation's data was unfair, as it was not designed to be a list of premises. "[The dataset] is an index of Australian addresses. The dataset does not contain a list of premises," he said ...

SECRECY, SECURITY, SNOOPING, and SUPPRESSION

Secrecy laws and cover-ups. How documents can be used to expose wrong-doing and manipulated to hide it. Should secrecy laws be broken when they hide evidence of crime? Do draconian secrecy laws in the name of public safety protect us from the ideology of extremists and terrorists or succumb to it? Is any of this really new?

[2018, Mar 7: Personal papers & whistleblowing](#) Secrets: some go to libraries, some get you charged

[2018, Jun 28: Perils of being a recordkeeper?](#) Protecting official secrets in the “Grey Zone”

[2019, May 17: More concerned with disclosure than damning substance](#) Obedient Nazis preferred

2018, March 7: Personal papers and whistleblowing in the news

Personal Papers

Ainslie Gotto, high-profile assistant to former PM John Gorton, died a week or so ago. Her papers, deposited at NLA, are in the news. According to [press reports](#) they comprise :

... a secret trove of official and personal documents ... [to be] released after her death or on her orders while she is alive ... Including personal letters, official documents and insight into the inner workings of the PM's office, the material donated includes over 40 boxes of historic records ...

A story in today's [Australian](#) (which you won't be able to see online without paying) says the access conditions were altered shortly before her death to give access to her biographer and to extend the barrier to public access until 2023.

Whistleblowing Documents Seized

In the [continuing story](#) of Australian bugging of the Timorese Government's Cabinet deliberations, it is reported that the spy who blew the whistle has had his passport seized. On top of that authorities have seized papers from his lawyer's Canberra home:

The Australian secret intelligence service agent, known only as Witness K, had his passport seized in 2013 as he prepared to give evidence in The Hague on an Australian bugging operation ... The revelations caused Timor-Leste to launch legal action at The Hague, saying Australia's espionage voided a John Howard-era agreement on sharing the reserves. Witness K's passport was taken at the same time as authorities raided the Canberra home of his lawyer, Bernard Collaery, seizing a cache of documents. Witness K has since launched action in the security division of the administrative appeals tribunal to have his passport handed back. The proceedings have been resisted by the Australian government, which still describes him as a security risk. On Wednesday, as Australian and Timor-Leste signed a new agreement about sharing the reserves, Collaery spoke out about the continued “disgraceful” treatment of Witness K. “The refusal of a passport to witness K long after the director-general of Asio cleared him for a passport is pure retaliation,” Collaery told Guardian Australia ... “The cover-up continues.” Were it not for Witness K, Collaery said, the misconduct towards Timor-Leste would “never have been disclosed”.

None of this should come as a surprise once you understand that persecution of whistleblowers is not about punishment or mitigating damage, it is about discouraging the others (the Admiral Byng principle).

In normal times, “files” can be seized under a court order or as part of a police investigation of crime. They may become evidence, under the control of the court, during any ensuing court action and are then disposed of in orderly ways (sometimes not so orderly) according to judicial procedures that have been developed over many years. Some documents seized as evidence for a prosecution but not actually used in court create another class of records (usually left behind in the custody of the police or the DPP – leading to a quite different set of disposal issues). In the brave new world of anti-terrorism and tougher security legislation, authorities are grabbing documents (electronic and physical) in greater quantities than ever before for purposes which are not always clear. In some cases official documents are involved (e.g. [ABC's handing back the wrongly dumped Cabinet papers](#)) and seizure is on grounds (or pretext) of ownership of the artefact as much as it is about limiting access to the information. In other cases, however, such as that of [David Miranda](#) and Witness K's lawyer, authorities have no claim to ownership and, if prosecution is not in prospect, seizure must be based on some statutory power to protect security.

My question is what ultimately becomes of “files” seized in this way if no prosecution is undertaken? Are they eventually returned to the owner? Do they become property of the State? Are they “Commonwealth records”? Are they subject to government disposal and access rules? Once the State can no longer plausibly argue that security is at risk, how is access governed? Are they, in effect, in the same disposal class as “files” seized in a criminal matter but never presented as evidence in court? At the very least, our archives authorities need to have a view on the disposal of such records as they will have had to

develop a view already on the disposal of “files” seized in criminal investigations that were not presented in court (are they, or are they not, subject to government disposal regulation).

2018, June 28: Perils of being a recordkeeper?

In 2004, Australia (in dispute with East Timor over gas reserves) unlawfully bugged the East Timor Cabinet rooms. So far as I am aware, this has never been officially denied. But Australians seem to get more upset about ball-tampering than illegal spying on a friendly neighbour. For nearly 5 years, since Australia's wrong-doing came to light, our Government has been going after a man known only as “Witness K” who revealed the illegality and was only prevented from testifying in a case brought by East Timor before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague when Australian authorities seized his passport. For much of the intervening period, Witness K has been pursued under anti-terrorism powers (the same powers that were further strengthened within the last few days). Now he and his lawyer are being [charged with a criminal offence](#).

As with Daniel Ellsberg, Mordechai Vanunu, and Edward Snowden, the information in question concerns unlawful activity by government, the truth of which is undeniable. This makes no difference to authorities. Indeed, the truth of what is revealed seems to make the offence worse in their eyes. Witness K is different to the others, however, because, according to his lawyer, he's not a whistleblower. He took his information to proper authority – the Inspector-General of Security. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case, it demonstrates the growing danger of being an information handler in a post 9/11 world.

Archivists have always known that information can be dynamite. The view of the State is unequivocal. A breach of security cannot be excused on the basis that what is being exposed is wrong. Handlers of information are expected to be complicit in covering up the wrong-doing. That expectation extends to state employees of course and, under the laws used to frame these charges and so recently broadened with bipartisan support, extends also to anyone else dealing with information in a way deemed “harmful” to the State.

One does not offend only by actions that are prohibited, but by actions officials deem “harmful”. Such laws are not about breaches that are knowable in advance; they are about the state of mind of officials when offence is taken. No one can know, until one's actions are deemed harmful, whether or not one is doing wrong. It follows that one can offend without knowing or meaning to. How did we come to this? The common response to encroachments on our shared freedoms is to shrug and say, “Oh well, it's necessary I suppose” and not to think too much about it. Despite many warnings from lawyers and journalists, most people seem to think that only the “baddies” are going to be affected. But we know that when basic freedoms are subverted, it is not just the baddies who suffer – we all do sooner or later.

What has all this to do with archives-and-recordkeeping-professionals? Well, we are information handlers and the risks associated with information handling have been growing of late. I don't think we have considered deeply enough what this means for us. If charities and not-for-profits are alarmed, for goodness sake, how much more reason do we have? But perhaps I'm just being paranoid (living a country in which Peter Dutton is responsible for home security will do that to you). I trust those who are unlawfully monitoring our email traffic are taking all this down.

2018, July 2: Viewed through the prism of an access regime, the prosecution of Witness K and his lawyer (Bernard Collaery, who is being charged with conspiracy), reveals the capriciousness and unknowability of the “rules” now governing restricted access to official information. As r/keepers we have a vested interest in rules-based access. In totalitarian regimes, of course, the rule is “Whatever The Man wants” but we flatter ourselves that it's different here. In [Crikey](#) (you'll need a free trial subscription) it is reported that –

... Collaery is being charged with illegally communicating information via interviews or conversations with a number of ABC journalists and producers ... [in] ... early December 2013 or March 2014 ... [but] ... the revelation of the illegal bugging of the Timorese cabinet wasn't by the ABC in December 2013, but by *The Australian* on May 29, 2013 — when Collaery told *The Australian's* Leo Shanahan what ASIS had done.

Shanahan isn't mentioned in the summons to Collaery, which goes through chapter and verse of all the times he is meant to have illegally shared information with ABC staff. Why the selective focus on the ABC when the original "offence" was committed with News Corp? If the government has its way in preventing Collaery and K's trials from being held in public, we'll likely never find out. No journalists, editors or producers have been directly charged.

You're in breach of the rules if someone thinks harm is done to Australia by talking to the ABC but not by talking to the *Australian*. Perhaps someone thinks it's the ABC that needs to be muzzled, not Mr Collaery. Australia is not harmed, apparently, by publishing such truths (yet) but we are harmed, it would seem, by the actions of those who reveal them to the media. Is it too much of a stretch to suggest that access is being weaponized (as they say)? The media isn't under direct attack (yet) but those who handle "harmful" information that ends up in the media can be picked off. If you want to get a grip on all this try reading Peter Greste's "[The Grey Zone: space that gives us freedom is under threat](#)". The Grey Zone is ... the pluralist, open, multicultural space that is fundamental to the way a functioning democratic society works. The Grey Zone allows us to live alongside different faiths without killing one another ... The Grey Zone is the space that journalists work in, interrogating all sides to any given story; questioning and challenging those in positions of power and authority. It allows the free flow of ideas, both good and bad, so that the solid ones prove their resilience, while the lousy ones get knocked into piles of intellectual rubble ... And the organisation that coined the term? ... It was Islamic State. IS has an English-language online magazine called *Dabiq*, and in 2015 it published a cover story calling for "The Extinction of the Grey Zone". For IS, pluralism, nuance and debate are antithetical to all it believes in. The article makes clear that there can be no room for questioning the theocrats in charge ... Their world is black and white, where free speech, free thought and a free press are simply unacceptable

IS coined the term to celebrate attacks such as the one on *Charlie Hebdo* and to identify an ideological target in their war on pluralism. Greste continues –

... Governments the world over have been using national security to chip away at the space a free press traditionally regards as its own ... Whether it is the data retention laws that make it almost impossible to protect journalists' sources; or the foreign fighters' legislation that prevents the media from interrogating the ideas that drive extremism; or the latest tranche of national security legislation, each in their own way chips away at the Grey Zone ... the Espionage and Foreign Interference Bill ... makes reporting on a host of national issues extraordinarily risky. As the latest draft was worded, it becomes an offence to damage national security, where "national security" is defined as anything that could cause harm or prejudice Australia's political or economic relations with other countries. Other secrecy offences are similarly vague. They prevent publication of any information (not just classified information) which harms "Australia's interests". Any critical reporting of government policy around trade, international relations, security and so on, all risk being seen as "harming Australia's national interest" and putting reporters in prison ...

How ironic that by attacking the Grey Zone, by squeezing us all into black-and-white-thinking, our government is actually doing the terrorists' work for them because that is exactly what IS wants too. If the Government establishes in court that it is harmful to reveal that Australia committed an illegal act, how much longer can it be before someone decides it is harmful to publish it? And how much longer after that before they start applying the doctrine selectively to those critics they don't like? But the press is protected isn't it? Tell that to Julian Assange.

When you fight someone, you take on that person's qualities. You become that person. You become your enemy. And your enemy wins because now there's another one of him in the world.
(Michael Prescott, [Becoming Your Enemy](#))

2019, January 25: Snooping, swatting, and spying

Pithy review on the [CLA site](#) of legislation passed by our Federal Parl't in the last hours of 2018:

Peter Dutton's [Telecommunications and Other Legislation Amendment \(Assistance and Access\) Bill 2018](#) passed on the last sitting day of the year at the very last opportunity ... The new legislation provides law enforcement and security agencies with access to citizens' encrypted messages by requiring communications providers to give assistance in gathering data. And it also sets up a new warrant system enabling authorities to covertly obtain evidence from electronic devices ... thrown on top of the pile of [more than 70 other pieces of legislation](#) that have been passed at the federal level in the name of counterterrorism

since 9/11... The Assistance and Access Bill allows authorities to access encrypted data stored by communications providers via three avenues.

- A technical assistance request allows providers to give voluntary assistance to authorities in gathering information from their systems.
- A technical assistance notice is a compulsory request made by the director general of security, which requires a provider to give assistance they are already capable of providing, such as decrypting any information that they have the ability to do so.
- And then there's the technical capability notice, which is another compulsory request requiring a provider to build a new capability that will give authorities access to data information.

Both these compulsory requests are made under the threat of major fines if they're not carried out.

"We must set ourselves on a course of information sharing between law enforcement agencies and other government departments, with this end in mind: when does the right of privacy for the individual start to impinge on the common good of society?" Mr Dutton [told the parliament in 2002](#).

We might ask when does the common good of society start to become the [tyranny of the majority](#)? Even with push back from the courts, it is [speculated](#) that governments won't back off from exploiting the digital gold mine and with all the revelations about dubious or illegal government snooping [here](#) and [overseas](#), it makes you wonder why they bother to arm themselves with yet more legal powers. To say nothing about [snooping by private corporations](#). On a completely unrelated matter, there is just one more week left in which to [opt out](#) of MHR. Meanwhile-

1. The [Defence Amendment \(Call Out of the Australian Defence Force\) Bill 2018](#) was passed on 27 November. This legislation lowered the threshold of when the government can send in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) to assist state and territory police forces with domestic incidents. Prior to its passing, the troops could only be sent in when state authorities had exhausted all options. Now they can be sent in to "enhance" the ability of local police. And the bill also specifies certain circumstances in which the troops can be deployed to break up protests and strikes.
2. The trial of Witness K and Bernard Collaery continues in secret. They revealed how our government spied on the East Timorese Government during negotiations over undersea resources and then lied about it.

2019, March 18: Archives and the public good

- They can raid your bank account without telling you.
- They can persecute you in order to achieve revenue and performance targets.
- They can delay for months (even years) rather than admit they're wrong.
- They can destroy your business.
- They can define a bank loan and a tax refund as income.
- They can raid your home and remove information, photos, and emails.
- They can imprison you for over 150 years for telling the truth.

In a post-truth era, what responsibility (if any) do we recordkeepers have for exposing the truth contained in records with which we are entrusted under bonds of secrecy or confidentiality? Not simply opining, mind you, but revealing the evidence when we're not supposed to. Are we ever entitled, for a "higher" purpose, to breach the trust that is the basis of our employment? Or, are we bound by the terms of our employment come what may? What do the ethics of our profession tell us? Can we ever take on the mantle of Sir Henry Vane the Younger (1641: confidential notes leaked to Pym during the trial of Strafford), Benjamin Franklin (1773: Hutchinson Letters), Daniel Ellsberg (1971: Pentagon Papers), Mark Felt (1972: Deep Throat), Mordechai Vanunu (1986: Israel's illegal nuclear weapons), Witness K (2004: Australian spooks bugging the East Timorese Cabinet Room), Libor Michalek (2010: Prague water treatment plant), Edward Snowden (2013: covert security internet surveillance), Benjamin Koh (2016: CBA chief medical officer on handling of insurance claims) - to name but a few - or does the public good, or at least our interpretation of it, [never](#) justify a breach of faith?

The [case of Richard Boyle](#), ATO whistleblower and alleged phone-tapper and leaker of "protected" information, is coming to a close. He's been charged with 66 offences arising out of leaking against ATO and stimulating a [joint media investigation](#) with *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and ABC's *Four*

Corners titled *Mongrel Bunch of Bastards*, which blew the lid on abuses by the ATO against small business and individuals.

Days before he went public his home was raided by the AFP and the ATO, which alleged in a warrant he had illegally taken copies of taxpayer information, photos of ATO computer screens or emails. Weeks earlier he had declined a settlement with the ATO on the basis he didn't want to be gagged from exposing questionable behaviour inside the country's most powerful institution. So, it would seem that authorities were sufficiently unconcerned by the gravity of his offences while they could be used as a threat to silence him and only prosecuted them when he refused.

Subsequently, the bipartisan House standing committee on tax and revenue on Friday released a scathing report on the ATO, making 37 recommendations for reform. "As the committee commenced its annual report review in March 2018, there was an acceleration of bad press as the ATO fought off allegations of systemic unfairness to small business, and performance-driven debt action, which were televised," the committee said. "The recommendations made in this report intend to adjust the imbalance of power perceived by taxpayers in their engagement with the ATO, and to ensure that, under the ATO's Reinvention [agenda], willing engagement will be the test for fair treatment."

In all these cases, it is clear that it is not the supposed damage done by the leak that concerns "them"; it's about punishing whistleblowers to discourage the others (the Admiral Byng effect). As a profession, are we discouraged or are we courageous? It is common amongst us to speak of records (so far as we, their handlers, are concerned) as value-free carriers of evidence - as if we have no more moral responsibility in their handling than bombardiers releasing high explosives over cities. We glory in the virtue and hide from the shame of our trade in dangerous secrets. What view do we take of our responsibilities (if any) in that situation - when the possibility arises that records in our care expose wrongdoing that may not come to light unless we act? Absent a total professional prohibition on whistleblowing in all such cases, the balance of right and wrong will never be easy and I doubt any formula could give unequivocal guidance. But is it an issue we can avoid and say nothing? It appears to me that's what we do and, if our heads stay in the sand, the default position is that we do nothing.

But, what is the alternative? For many years, governments didn't transfer to archives because it was seen as a danger to confidentiality; it took many decades to overcome that attitude. How could a recordkeeper ever be entrusted with any confidential material if we belong to a profession that entitles (or even commands) us to reveal such information in circumstances over which the begetter of the information has no control? Echoes of the medivac debate: how can those responsible for border security entrust the final decision to medical staff dedicated not to security but to healing? In a blundering, muddle-headed, politically charged and opportunistic way, they seem to have balanced security-vs-humanitarianism in the medivac imbroglio (sort of). Is it really beyond our wit to find a middle way or must confidentiality trump all? Must the balance between truth and trust remain as it is currently set?

2019, June 5: Confidentiality, secrecy, and privacy

An ATO [whistleblower is facing jail time](#) (and lots of it) for breaching laws re nondisclosure of documents:

A key crossbencher will seek a Senate order when Parliament resumes next month to investigate the Australian Taxation Office's handling of [whistleblower Richard Boyle, who faces six life sentences if found guilty](#)...He will appear in court in July where he will plead not guilty to the 66 charges of breaching laws on handling public documents and recording phone calls when he spoke out on the ATO's mistreatment of taxpayers...[Boyle became an internal whistleblower on October 12, 2017](#) when he made a disclosure under the provisions of the Public Interest Disclosure (PID) Act 2013 to the ATO. His allegations were investigated by a senior ATO investigator and rejected 15 days later on October 27..."It is clear from the ATO's obstructive response to my FOI application that they don't want anything known about what happened in the 15 days between when Richard Boyle lodged his Public Interest Disclosure and when they dismissed it," Senator Patrick said. "Richard Boyle raised very important concerns about unethical and unprofessional conduct in his disclosure, yet the ATO determined that his disclosure 'does not, to any extent, concern serious disclosable conduct'. There is no doubt in my mind that the conduct described by Richard fits within the meaning of disclosable conduct as described in the Public Interest Disclosure Act."...Boyle faces more than 160 years in prison if convicted of breaching laws on handling public documents and recording phone calls when he spoke out on the ATO's mistreatment of taxpayers...

Boyle leaked after ATO cleared itself in response to his PIC complaint because ATO doesn't believe mistreatment of taxpayers amounts to serious misconduct. At what point does an individual's sense of obligation to the public outweigh duty to an employer (even where that duty is founded on legal obligation, or, even more solemnly, on a professional code of ethics)? Bear in mind that it is only insiders who really know. Can anything ever justify the actions of any of these whistleblowers:

Henry Vane (executive power in 17th century England), Samuel Shaw (torture), Herbert Yardley (espionage), Herbert von Bose (atrocities), Peter Buxton (Tuskegee), John Paul Vann (Vietnam), John White (Tonkin Gulf), Frank Serpico (NYPD), Perry Fellwock (covert surveillance), Karen Silkwood (nuclear power), Daniel Ellsberg (Pentagon Papers), Vladimir Bukovsky (psychiatric abuse in USSR), Mark Felt (Watergate), Stanley Adams (price fixing), A Ernest Fitzgerald (\$US2B cost over-run), the "GE Three" (nuclear plants), Frank Snepp (Vietnam), Ralph McGehee (covert operations), Clive Ponting (Belgrano sinking), Duncan Edmonds (Canadian security breach), Ingvar Bratt (Bofors scandal), Ronald J Goldstein (nuclear power), Mordechai Vanunu (Israeli nukes), Henry Templeton (pension funds), Myron Mehlman (toxic petrol), Arnold Gundersen (nuclear again), Mark Whitacre (price-fixing), George Galatis (nuclear yet again), Jeffrey Wigand (tobacco), David Franklin (pharmaceuticals), Michael Ruppert (CIA drug-trafficking), Nancy Olivieri (toxic pharmaceuticals), David Shayler (criminal acts of MI5), Christoph Meili (Holocaust victims' assets), Marc Hodler (IOC hi-jinx), Stefan P Kruszewski (mentally ill children), Joseph Nacchio (NSA telecommunications surveillance), Jesselyn Radak (document destruction by DOJ!!!!), Kevin Lindeberg (document destruction in Queensland), Joe Darby (prisoner abuse in Iraq), Anat Kamm (Israeli extra-judicial killings), Witness K (Australia spies on East Timor), Cathy Harris (racial profiling), Edward Snowden (NSA surveillance again), Chelsea Manning (US diplomatic cables), and many, many more

Go through [the full list](#) and tick off which ones (if you were in their position and in possession guilty knowledge) you would condemn. When does corporate wrongdoing become so egregious that it outweighs any countervailing considerations of security, privacy, or confidentiality? What do you think? And what does our profession have to say about whistleblowing to expose illegality/misconduct, possibly in violation of one's obligations as an employee, but in the service of the public interest?

... As employees archivists are bound to conform to employer expectations of, standards for or directions about, matters like demeanour and obedience, handling of confidentiality or privacy issues, resourcing levels, and these may conflict with professional standards ... The Code ... includes several clauses that serve to remind archivists of their wider responsibilities in the business world, to the law, and as managers, scholars and teachers...The Code largely excludes matters which are more appropriately regulated by institutions or which require a discretionary response, such as archival processing (arrangement, description, finding aids, conservation), reading room rules and interpersonal relations with readers and donors...

"2.2.1 Archivists avoid irresponsible criticism of other archivists or institutions and address complaints about professional or ethical conduct to the individual or institution concerned or to an appropriate professional organisation."

"2.4.1 Archivists distinguish clearly in their actions and statements between their personal beliefs and attitudes and those of employing institution or professional body."

"2.4.2 Archivists resist pressure from any source to manipulate evidence so as to conceal or distort facts, subject to access provisions expressed in clause 3.6.2."

"3.5.1 Archivists preserve, protect and maintain the integrity of the records in their control and the information contained therein."

"3.6.2 Archivists observe any restrictions on access to records in their care imposed by legislation, administrative or executive decision, or by owners or donors of the records. They explain pertinent restrictions to potential users and apply them equitably."

"3.7.1 Archivists protect the privacy of employers, clients, donors and users with respect to information sought or received and materials consulted."

"3.7.4 Archivists shall not without permission, use any confidential information acquired during the course of their work for personal advantage or for the advantage of a co-worker or a third person. Nor shall an archivist use such information to the disadvantage of employer, donor or client nor disclose such information, except where such disclosure may be justified at law."

"3.7.5 Archivists shall protect personal information gained under privilege and contained in records in their custody. Subject to relevant legislation and/or conditions of records transfer, archivists shall neither disclose

*nor enable others to disclose, personal information that would identify individuals as subjects of case files without their consent." **ASA Code of Ethics***

So, if Boyle were an archivist he would be bound professionally to repress any personal beliefs (2.4.1), to be satisfied with ATO's response to the PIC complaint (2.2.1), to observe ATO's restrictions on access when asked (3.6.2) even if it means concealing or distorting facts (2.4.2), and not to use confidential information to ATO's disadvantage (3.7.4). What could be clearer?

If you want to understand the official attitude to whistleblowing look at the Canadian case of Duncan Edmonds who was blacklisted not for breaching security but for exposing a security breach. Go figger.

Even as we speak of this, our Government is [raiding journalists and news outlets](#) under laws passed ostensibly to protect us from terrorism but actually being used to avoid scrutiny. The politicians told us this wouldn't happen. Now they say "It's the law, we cannot intervene".

... The legal director at the Human Rights Law Centre, Emily Howie, said the government's new espionage laws, passed with the help of Labor last year, raised concerns about the future of public interest journalism. "The new espionage offence is just the latest law to cover government in a shroud of secrecy and prevent insiders from speaking out. It's a dangerous law that goes too far and damages press freedom and should urgently be reformed," she said. "The raids highlight just how dangerous it has become for whistleblowers to reveal information in the public interest." The media union, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, said the ABC raid represented "a disturbing attempt to intimidate legitimate news journalism that was in the public interest". The president of the union's media section, Marcus Strom, said both the [Coalition](#) and Labor needed to "take collective responsibility for the legal framework they've created that is allowing for what appears to be a politically motivated assault on press freedom". "A second day of raids by the [Australian federal police](#) sets a disturbing pattern of assaults on Australian press freedom. This is nothing short of an attack on the public's right to know ... "It is equally clear that the spate of national security laws passed by the parliament over the past six years have been designed not just to combat terrorism but to persecute and prosecute whistleblowers who seek to expose wrongdoing. These laws seek to muzzle the media and criminalise legitimate journalism. They seek to punish those that tell Australians the truth."

The triggers seem to be

- a story about operations in Afghanistan involving killing of civilians (possibly unlawful);
- another story suggesting ASD was covertly trying to expand its powers.

These laws are not being used to thwart terrorists trying to blow us up but to thwart scrutiny. They are being used to prevent us from finding out what the Government doesn't want us to know about alleged wrong-doing in the defence and security forces. Who needs a mealy-mouthed Code of Ethics to stop r/keepers from being whistleblowers? The State can intimidate us without any help from the profession. The Government says it's not the media they're after, it's the leakers. Indeed. If they shut down the leakers, they've got nothing more to fear from the press.

What made Orwell such a great prophet was not his nightmare vision of an all-powerful State, it was his masterful account of the incremental steps (each one hardly worth bothering about) by which we get there.

2019, June 6: <<[Deb Leigo](#):...I would like to see more discussion on this - perhaps it's time for another ASA Ethics, Lies and Archives (1993) seminar? We are certainly being presented with a variety of scenarios which may not have even been thought of 25 years ago. "*What is the difference between (and should there be a difference) professionals who have statutory obligations to report suspected activity - such as teachers and others reporting suspected child abuse, public servants reporting corruption or misconduct, a citizen reporting suspected illegal activity - calling Crime Stoppers - and an employee/whistle-blower doing similar. If an employee (or anyone) is aware of such activity and does nothing they may end up an accomplice.*" And then there is the line between illegal and unethical / immoral activity - each of us has our judgement, based on personal constructs, on degrees of morality and ethics.>>

<<[Andrew Waugh](#): ...this is the government that Australia just voted for. This behaviour sits squarely in how the government has acted over the previous six years, so no-one can realistically claim they weren't aware of the government's approach or beliefs...Just remember that next time you are tempted to be a

whistle blower...Chris provided a long list of well known examples of instances of these scenarios dating back a century or more. They are only the tip of the iceberg. Governance and corruption issues haven't changed an iota as people haven't changed...There is no legal or professional issue what-so-ever. If you, as an archivist, encounter evidence of illegal or unethical behaviour, there is a process that you should follow to raise the problem and get it addressed...>>

2019, June 7: Apparently, the raids were not conducted under recent anti-terrorist legislation but under provisions of the [Crimes Act](#) dating [from 1914](#). Makes you wonder why they didn't resort to the [Treason Act of 1351](#).

2020, April 19: Spooks 1 : Twitter 0

[U.S. judge blocks Twitter's bid to reveal government surveillance requests](#)

Twitter Inc will not be able to reveal surveillance requests it received from the U.S. government after a federal judge accepted government arguments that this was likely to harm national security after a near six-year long legal battle. The social media company had sued the U.S. Department of Justice in 2014 to be allowed to reveal, as part of its "Draft Transparency Report", the surveillance requests it received ...

Tech companies were seeking to clarify their relationships with U.S. law enforcement and spying agencies in the wake of revelations by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden that outlined the depth of U.S. spying capabilities ...

2020, October 30: Not in the public interest

A video from 2015 [obtained by SBS](#) under FOI shows a Christmas Island detainee being pushed, punched, and wrestled to the ground by five guards. The video was part of the evidence that persuaded the Australian Human Rights Commission to make a finding of excessive force. AHRC released the video under FOI despite objections from D. of Home Affairs. The Department's objections make fascinating reading –

... the footage should be kept under wraps as it would have a "substantial adverse impact" on the operations of Serco, the multinational company that provides security in Australia's immigration detention network. "The release of this information could result in operational and administrative inefficiencies for Serco, and, ultimately, expose the Commonwealth to additional contractual burdens," the department said in a consultation letter to the commission. "Given the possible contractual impacts for the Commonwealth and the risks to the centres as a whole, this would be contrary to the public interest."

They live in a little world all of their own, some of these people. AHRC, deciding to grant the FOI request, disagreed with the Department, saying -

.. the footage would inform the public about "the practices followed by the department and Serco, and its conduct of operations ... in closed immigration settings". "Disclosure of this type of information ... goes towards increasing scrutiny, discussion, comment and review of the government's activities," the commission wrote in a consultation letter.

Scrutiny, discussion, comment, and review are in the public interest? Who knew.

<<[Michael Piggott](#): You've really got to wonder about the people who draft and the people who approve for release phrases like "substantial adverse impact", "additional contractual burdens" and "possible contractual impacts" ... As Orwell observed at the end of his essay "[Politics and the English Language](#), "Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.">> Along the same lines, the latest offering from [A.Word.A.Day](#) is "vaporous". One meaning given is *vague, hazy, obscure, insubstantial, transitory, unreliable, fanciful*.

2019, May 17: More concerned with disclosure than damning substance

Chelsea Manning is facing jail and penury for [refusing to testify](#) against Julian Assange. The case against Witness K and his lawyer for revealing [unlawful actions by Australia's security services](#) is being held behind closed doors. No one has denied the unlawful behaviour of the US and Australian Governments in these two cases. That is simply ignored while those governments pursue people who helped bring those actions to light. How to handle dangerous information that exposes evil-doing and the possible consequences of the choices you make are r/keeping issues. Manning's lawyer hits the nail on the head in a statement that applies equally to both cases:

"It is telling that the United States has always been more concerned with the disclosure of those documents than with the damning substance of the disclosures."

In order to understand the attitude of authority towards whistleblowers you must take to heart the tale of General von Gersdorf. He was one of the military plotters against Hitler, one of the few to survive the War. He turned himself into what we would now call a suicide bomber when escorting Hitler around an exhibition of captured weaponry. But The Fuhrer left early and Gersdorf had to disarm himself. After the War he was in an American POW Camp along with other staff officers – Nazis and anti-Nazis. The Americans started to release the former into their Zone of Occupation, but not the latter. Gersdorf asked why. The American Commandant was frank:

General So-and-So, he said (referring to a recently released officer), has shown throughout his career that he obeys orders. He will give us no trouble. You and your friends, on the other hand, have demonstrated that you are, on occasion, prepared to disregard your sworn duty and act upon individual conscience. That attitude represents a threat to orderly administration. You will stay where you are.

Those in authority prefer obedient Nazis to witnesses for truth. Understand that, and you will know what to expect.

2020, December 3:

*Those in authority prefer obedient Nazis to witnesses for truth.
Understand that, and you will know what to expect.*

From [today's Guardian](#) (3 Dec. 2020)

The Australian lawyer Bernard Collaery has won a prestigious British free speech prize for his efforts exposing a secret Australian operation to bug Timor-Leste's fledgling government during sensitive oil and gas negotiations. Collaery is still being [pursued by the Australian government](#) through the criminal courts and, if convicted, the barrister and former ACT attorney general faces jail for allegedly sharing protected intelligence information.

The charge stems from an episode during which Collaery, who frequently acted for intelligence officers, represented an Australian spy known as Witness K, who had grown increasingly concerned about a 2004 mission to bug the government offices of Timor-Leste during commercial negotiations with Australia, an ally, to carve up the resource-rich Timor Sea. The actions of Witness K and Collaery helped Timor-Leste, one of the world's poorest nations, take a case to the international courts and, eventually, renegotiate a fairer deal.

Now, Collaery has been recognised with the International Blueprint for Free Speech Whistleblowing prize, which recognises the bravery and integrity of whistleblowers who have made a positive impact in the public interest. Previous winners of Blueprint for Free Speech awards include [Chelsea Manning](#), who won while behind bars in 2016 at a maximum security prison in Kansas, and Nick Martin, the doctor who blew the whistle on Australia's [treatment of asylum seekers on Nauru](#) ...

One of the judges, Lady Hollick, an award-winning former investigative television journalist, described Collaery's story as "extraordinary" ... She said it showed the dangers posed to those who told the truth about the Timor-Leste scandal ... In October, the Law Council of Australia [threw its support behind Collaery](#). It took particular umbrage at the secrecy surrounding his case, in part enforced through the national security information act, which is designed to govern the handling of sensitive and protected information by the courts ...

2020, December 4: <<[Michael Piggott](#): ...the Brereton inquiry and by extension the Australian War Memorial continues to be topical...>> Less than a fortnight ago, the conclusions of the Report (years in the making) were being accepted, seemingly unreservedly, by the Defence Force and by a "shocked" PM. Then came the blow-back and the PM disavowing the Army's proposal to strip medals from the units involved by saying it wasn't up to Army. What to do about the AWM Exhibition (and whether that will be decided by the AWM Council or by curators) seems to be up in the air. Now, Andrew Hastie MP is [describing](#) earlier allegations of atrocities (in the Cromptoets "Report") which were part of Brereton's investigations are based on "unproven rumours". Perhaps the treatment of whistleblowers was one reason the conversations Cromptoets describes were "off the record".

“The Cromptvoets [report] detailed unproven rumours of Australian soldiers murdering Afghan children,” the backbencher and former soldier told parliament. “It may have prompted the [Brereton report](#), but its evidentiary threshold was far lower. The [Brereton report](#) neither rules these rumours in or out. So why are they in the open? It has undermined public confidence in the process and allowed the People’s Republic of China to malign our troops.”

The [465-page inspector general’s report](#) published by the ADF in November included details of Cromptvoets’ early interviews with sources including special forces insiders. It said that Cromptvoets had been told of “an incident where members from the SASR were driving along a road and saw two 14-year-old boys whom they decided might be Taliban sympathisers”. “They stopped, searched the boys and slit their throats,” the report said. “The rest of the Troop then had to ‘clean up the mess’, which involved bagging the bodies and throwing them into a nearby river. Dr Cromptvoets says she was told this was not an isolated incident.” The report added, however, that Cromptvoets did not detail any specific incident and did not identify any perpetrator or unit involved. “Rather, she described the information she received as ‘a whole lot of vague, nameless scenarios’, in conversations which she characterised as ‘off the record’,” the report said ...

Cromptvoets was contacted on Thursday but declined to comment. In an [interview with Guardian Australia earlier this week](#), she warned Australians against dismissing the Afghanistan war crimes scandal as the work of a “few bad apples” and expressed dismay at the tenor of the public debate since the report’s release. Hastie’s speech was triggered by [an article in the West Australian newspaper](#) by the broadcaster Alan Jones, who accused the prime minister, Scott Morrison, of giving China an opening to attack the special forces. Jones argued the prime minister had lit the match by warning Australia to expect “brutal truths” to be revealed in the Brereton report ...

CULTURE WARS

Is critical theory a different kind of post-truth, masquerading as ethical relativism? What a difference a word makes. Statue Wars, Black Lives Matter, and other claims to justice confronting Houses of Memory. Are exhibitions “political” statements and, if so, who has the right to complain?

[2017, Dec 27: A silly season reflection on the matter of offence](#) Toleration vs Freedom

[2018, May 12: Aspects of memory](#) Merely a literary evocation cloaking a factual account?

[2019, Feb 6: Populism, \(post\)truth and recordkeeping](#) Did postmodernism beget post-truth?

[2019, Feb 17: The moving finger writes ...](#) History, truth, dogma, and modern sensibilities (ADB)

[2019, Apr 23: Glorification vs Understanding](#) Immersive experiences or overblown memorialization?

[2020, Jun 11: What a difference a word makes \(1\)](#) A long and winding thread begins

[2020, Jun 12: What a difference ... \(2\) Statue wars](#) Some examples and a few issues

[2020, Jun 15: What a difference ... \(3\) Black lives matter etc.](#) Attempts at contextualization

[2020, Jly 19: Critical theory](#) How I came across it and totally misunderstood it (until later)

[2020, Aug 9: What a difference ... \(5\) Critical theory and cultural competence](#)

[2020, Dec 4: “New Museum”](#) Chinese political pressure on exhibitors

[2021, Jan 20: Pigeon in peril](#) How a lament for Joe’s plight became entangled in cultural theory

[2021, Feb 19: Old, damaged or untruthful](#) How critical theory operates

2017, December 27: A silly season reflection on the matter of offence

The British are apparently setting up a free speech watchdog over publicly funded universities. [The Minister, Jo Johnson, has given a speech](#) warning about attempted suppression of contrary views as distinct from expressing disagreement and developing an argument. But this is not all it seems. The world

is divided into two camps: those who believe in free-speech and those who believe in free-speech-but..... Ms Johnson is of the latter persuasion and it irks me that such folk are able to promote themselves as free speech advocates. Her views are not 1,000 kilometers removed from issues arising under the offence provisions in our laws and the establishment of an office to promote free speech "within the law" is pointless if it is stymied by vilification and anti-defamation legislation. Not protecting speech judged to be a "smokescreen" for hateful views (such as racism and antisemitism) hardly honors the spirit of Voltaire.

Universities ... face tough new penalties if they do not promote freedom of speech ... His defence of open debate comes amid a row at Oxford University, where dozens of academics have criticised a professor for arguing that Britain's imperial history was not entirely shameful. Nigel Biggar, regius professor of moral and pastoral theology at the university, has been criticised by colleagues and students after writing an article in *The Times* calling for a more nuanced appraisal ... Mr Johnson sets out the dangers of shielding students from views that differ from their own through "safe spaces" and "no-platforming" ... "In universities in America and worryingly in the UK, we have seen examples of groups seeking to stifle those who do not agree with them ... Young people should have the resilience and confidence to challenge controversial opinions and take part in open, frank and rigorous discussions. That is why the new regulator, the Office for Students, will go even further to ensure that universities promote freedom of speech within the law." ... Mr Johnson says that free speech must not be used as a smokescreen by those who wish to limit the rights of others. Universities must ensure, while protecting free speech, that students are not exposed to hatred or discrimination such as racism or antisemitism. "A racist or antisemitic environment is by definition an illiberal one that is completely in opposition to the liberal tradition of our universities," he says. Nearly 60 Oxford academics signed an open letter attacking Professor Biggar's views but he has retained the backing of the university authorities, who say that he is right to consider the historical context of the British Empire. Professor Biggar accused the academics of "collective online bullying". Mr Johnson initially set out his ambitions in *The Times* in October after several speakers had been told that they were not welcome by groups of students. These included Peter Tatchell, the human rights campaigner, and Germaine Greer, the feminist, over their views on transgender issues ...

So, this is not about free speech at all. It is a conflict between groups who think it's OK to suppress ideas (and the speech through which those ideas are expressed) that they regard as abhorrent. They agree that such speech should be suppressed (though they disagree about what methods to use) and the real disagreement between them is about sorting out which ideas are sufficiently abhorrent to be suppressed in the first place. What is the moral and philosophical difference between a state apparatus for suppressing speech and one that, in effect, licenses it?

Not really an archives-and-records issue, I suppose, but we must live in the real world too. If you want a recordkeeping angle, what position do we take on the preservation of offensive records? The archives of *Der Stuermer*, for example, or records of some of the more out-there experiments in eugenics where real harm was inflicted in pursuit of crazy ideas? What are the legitimate research uses to which records of medical experiments in the Nazi death camps can be put (or should they just be destroyed as abhorrent to civilisation)? To what principle do we appeal when we want to keep (or apply a "more nuanced appraisal" of) records that are culturally (or personally) offensive to some who would wish them destroyed? A lot of waffle is spoken about participation and parallel provenance affords a mechanism for providing a framework but not an outcome. So, who has the last word and why should they?

2018, May 12: Aspects of memory

Interesting report in *The Guardian* that throws into relief yet another dimension of memory.

[Doubt cast on account of heroic defence of liberal values written by father of Michael Portillo](#)

On 12 October 1936, Miguel de Unamuno stood in the assembly hall of Spain's oldest university and delivered a ... lament for the triumph of might over right and militarism over reason ... Angered by the ... presence of General José Millán Astray, the one-eyed, one-armed founder of the Spanish Legion and his chant of "Death to intelligence! Long live death!", the rector of the University of Salamanca offered a bitter prophecy ... "This is a temple of intelligence ... You are profaning its sacred precincts. You will win because you have an abundance of brute force, but you will not convince. To convince, you need to persuade, and to persuade you need something you lack: reason and right in the struggle" ... Eighty-two years [later] ... a Spanish researcher is casting doubt on the authenticity of the most famous speech of the civil war. Severiano Delgado, a historian and librarian at the University of Salamanca, argues that Unamuno's

stirring words were put in his mouth by one of his friends and acolytes at the university, Luis Portillo ... In 1941, possibly with some help from George Orwell, Luis Portillo published a piece in the literary magazine *Horizon*, entitled *Unamuno's Last Lecture*. Portillo had not witnessed the showdown ... His article was, at best, a reconstruction based on what he had heard of the events of that evening ... According to Delgado, Portillo's account of the speech acquired unstoppable momentum when the British historian Hugh Thomas came across it in a *Horizon* anthology while researching his seminal book, *The Spanish Civil War*, and accidentally treated it as a verbatim account ... Delgado, however, is keen to stress that neither man ever sought to deceive anyone. "What Portillo did was come up with a kind of liturgical drama, where you have an angel and a devil confronting one another. What he wanted to do above all was symbolise evil – fascism, militarism, brutality – through Millán Astray, and set it against the democratic values of the republicans – liberalism and goodness – represented by Unamuno. Portillo had no intention of misleading anyone; it was simply a literary evocation."

When we read Thucydides we are gripped by the drama of the speeches delivered by actors in the events the great historian narrates. I still recall the shock of discovering (many years ago now) that these are not authentic documentary records but rather "literary evocation" cloaking a factual account. Just how slippery memory can be is well illustrated by the statement in this article that Portillo's intention was to "symbolise evil – fascism, militarism, brutality – through Millán Astray, and set it against the democratic values of the republicans – liberalism and goodness – represented by Unamuno". Unamuno was anything but a republican in the context of the Spanish Civil War. His was a humane and civilised rebuttal of ideological excess - "... he initially welcomed Franco's revolt as necessary to rescue Spain from the excesses of the Second Republic. However, the harsh tactics employed by the Francoists in the struggle against their republican opponents caused him to oppose both the Republic and Franco." ([Wikipedia](#))

2019, February 6: Populism, (post)truth and recordkeeping

Still thinking through the implications of post-truth for r/keeping. An [article on populism](#) in the *Conversation*. Most unsatisfactory because it implies a link ("... they frequently advocate for a change to the status quo ... by promoting a sense of crisis (whether true or not) and presenting themselves as having the solution to the crisis ...") but does not clarify.

- So, does this author think that populism is an alternative way of looking at things or a way of distorting things? Is it a benign, postmodern (re)framing of the issues or a vehicle for lies and deceit?
- What then is the relation between populism and post-truth? Do populists expose the manipulations and lies of the elites by getting to the nub of the matter and telling it like it is or do they tear down what irks them regardless of truth by asserting beliefs instead of facts?
- Is populism a threat to democracy or its fulfilment? Do populists appeal to a majority or only to a cranky few? Are Brexit, Trump, Hanson, etc. (to say nothing of #MeToo trial by media, Australia Day Anxiety, and anti-vilification limitations on free speech) expressions of majority opinion or those of motivated minorities in the midst of an indifferent majority?
- What stories do the records tell? Whose truth? The elites or the mob? Where do we stand? Who do we serve? Does any of this affect the way we make records, keep them, appraise them, manage them, describe and present them? Or, do we simply do what we're told – no matter by whom?
- Are records instruments of liberation or repression? Should the *populaires* value and cherish archives as arsenals of liberty or break down the doors and burn them as instruments of oppression (as they did in 1789)? Is majority rule (democracy) hostile to liberty and safety or a threat? Where does safety lie – in elitism or populism? Was J M Keynes, the saviour of capitalism, correct after all?

... we repudiated all versions of the doctrine of original sin, of there being insane and irrational springs of wickedness in most men. We were not aware that civilisation was a thin and precarious crust erected by the personality and the will of a very few, and only maintained by rules and conventions skilfully put across and guilefully preserved. We had no respect for traditional wisdom or the restraints of custom ... *My Early Beliefs* (1938)

There was a better piece on populism in the *Conversation* some years ago compiled from the brief thoughts of a panel of writers. I believe that r/keepers must withstand post-truth because it violates our core values. What do others think? But what attitude should we take to populism: for, against, or agnostic?

2019, February 17: The moving finger writes ...

... and, having writ, Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit. Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it." Not so, it seems. The ADB is apparently to be revised to "correct" interpretations in existing articles and omissions now considered unacceptable. An [article](#) in *The Guardian* claims

... there are many ... examples of where the ADB's biographies have been exposed, with the passage of time as, at best, historically incomplete and at worst, perhaps, deliberately so in some cases ... the ADB has embarked on an ambitious project to reassess and re-scrutinise the lives of the subjects in its earliest volumes, to find the "missing" – mostly women and Indigenous people – and to apply new resources to scrutinising those in its 60-year-old pages ... In some cases it will involve the rewriting of history in the light of truths that may not have been apparent – or were overlooked – decades ago ... Frank Bongiorno, head of the history school at the Australian National University – which produces the ADB – describes what is happening as a "decolonisation" ... "... the ADB team – which like so many of our great cultural institutions is much smaller than it once was – is decolonising a project whose origins lie in an era before most white Australians were prepared to face what they and their ancestors had done to Aboriginal people," Bongiorno says ...

... The ADB receives 60m to 70m internet hits a year, the Centre for Biography another 20m ... Bongiorno says Australians concerned with the future of what is a national cultural treasure (and the longest-running and largest collaboration in the humanities in this Australia) should donate to the ADB's endowment fund ... "In contrast with government generosity to the Australian War Memorial – about half a billion dollars (announced last year with little deference to financial and governance processes for such a large commonwealth spend) for a new major extension – the ADB is among the multitude of great national cultural institutions which have to do a great deal with pretty limited resources. But it has a visionary general editor, a fine staff and a large army of devoted volunteers around the country."

And much more besides. In the same edition, there is [another story](#) about a battle over historical "truth". The Polish Government is very sensitive about accusations that Poland was complicit in the Holocaust. Israeli PM Netanyahu caused offence "when he said during a visit to Warsaw that Poles had collaborated with the Nazis in the Holocaust." But, no! It was all a misunderstanding -

On Friday, the two countries appeared to have patched up their dispute, blaming the media for misinterpreting Netanyahu's comments. The prime minister's office said he had spoken of collaboration by "Poles", meaning individual Polish people, not "the Poles".

At a time when identity and group offence is easily taken, it seems there may now be a Polish defence that is available to distinguish between individuals and the group. It reminds me of an old joke: *I love mankind, it's people I can't stand.*

2019, February 18: <<[Andrew Waugh](#): History is always being revised; one of the notable features of the last four years was the efforts by (some) British military historians to change the 'Blackadder' version of history of the British high command during WWI. So far they haven't been noticeably successful ... Revisions in interpretation are inevitable. First, because of new information ... Second, because of the changing nature of our understanding of history ... Third, because each historian that looks at a question brings their own context and knowledge to the interpretation. (And I have no respect for those simpletons who believe that history is just stringing together of facts.)>> ADB is a work of reference. Updating, correcting, adding, deleting, and superseding are a normal part of the process when managing such works. I have at home the famous 11th edition of EB which will no doubt be tossed out with the rest of my library by my executors. Its fame did not preclude the preparation of a 12th, 13th, and subsequent editions, however. Works of reference are like that. In print, superseded editions remain on library shelves (not so sure of that these days with the way libraries de-accession so ruthlessly) but ADB was originally in print form so books containing superseded entries will presumably remain on library shelves even if ADB itself doesn't version the digital. Historical revisionism is another thing entirely. That (as you say) is when old interpretations are questioned and/or superseded by later views. Again, perfectly natural and part of the

scholarly process. Revisionism results in new work superseding old work – or at least challenging it. The old and the new sit side by side and we, the readers, can make a judgement. Here revisionism of interpretation is being advanced as a rationale along with updating, correcting, adding, etc., for replacing or changing what was done before – somewhat different. Not illegitimate, but giving rise to slightly different issues.

You are assuming (I think) that I am taking a History Wars position. I have no reason to think that the editors/writers are less scholarly than their predecessors. And the motives, predispositions, assumptions, prejudices of all writers obviously influence what they write. In the article cited, they talk, inter alia, about correcting the squeamishness of earlier writers re sex and other tawdry matters and I couldn't help thinking reverse bowdlerisation! – putting the sex back in. But I could live with that. The debate over British high command during WWI seems to me to be a dispute over the facts and how to interpret them, not so much an ideological dispute. But even straight scholarship is tinged with the usual academic high-jinks, personal jealousies and ambitions, and battling over the portrayal of historical events as a surrogate projection of current political alignments. Every now and again it may also reflect honest differences of opinion, of course. Nothing to get over-excited about.

Increasingly, however, historical discourse is being drawn into the world of post-truth populism. You are correct, therefore, in detecting a whiff of suspicion (on my part) that the motives expressed (on their part) may be compromised by ideology. But that wouldn't lead me to argue that ADB shouldn't be touched. I certainly reject the postmodern view that a proper scepticism about our ability to think and write objectively is a licence to dispense altogether with the aim of trying to be objective. If that makes me a history warrior, so be it. In this case, I prefer to believe, lacking evidence to the contrary, that ADB will preserve the high standards of scholarship that are its legacy. If I'm going to sit on the fence on an issue like this, I may as well be sanctimonious about it. We laugh at Acton now for aspiring to produce a compendium history in which the reader could not tell where one pen left off and another began, forgetting that his noble aspiration did not imply an uncritical assumption that it could be easily done. I don't think he meant that history should be bland and even-handed, that the historian should abstain from taking a view but rather that we should strive not to be enslaved by prejudice and ideology – to be enslaved (as Ranke might have it) by evidence rather than belief. I share your contempt for those who believe history is just a stringing together of facts and I believe Acton would have also because he believed that history means "judging men and things". But he may have been wiser than we allow when he wrote:

- *A Historian has to fight against temptations special to his mode of life, temptations from Country, Class, Church, College, Party, Authority of talents, solicitation of friends.*
- *The most respectable of these influences are the most dangerous. The historian who neglects to root them out is exactly like a juror who votes according to his personal likes or dislikes.*
- *In judging men and things Ethics go before Dogma, Politics or Nationality. The Ethics of History cannot be denominational.*

So, at any rate, I believe and I will not be shamed out of that ethical position by those who ridicule my failure or that of anyone else to fully live up to it. A proper scholarly disposition ("Ethics go before Dogma ...") cannot be based on human frailty (that's what forgiveness is for). We go on striving even if we fail; we don't build a philosophical position on a foundation of failure. When Evelyn Waugh was criticised for adopting Christianity and still being a nasty so-and-so with it his reply was: "but you've no idea how much worse I'd be if I were not a Christian."

2019, February 18: <<...each historian that looks at a question brings their own context and knowledge to the interpretation...>> Does any of this resonate?

"Post-truth" ...is widely associated with ... Donald Trump's extravagantly untruthful assertions and the working-class people who voted for him nonetheless. But responsibility for the "post-truth" era lies with the middle-class professionals who prepared the runway for its recent take-off. Those responsible include academics, journalists, "creatives" and financial traders; even the centre-left politicians who have now been hit hard by the rise of the anti-factual ... the actual origins of "post-truth" ... lie neither with those deemed under-educated nor with their new-found champions. Instead, the groundbreaking work on "post-truth" was

performed by academics, with further contributions from an extensive roster of middle-class professionals. Left-leaning, self-confessed liberals, they sought freedom from state-sponsored truth; instead they built a new form of cognitive confinement – “post-truth”. More than 30 years ago, academics started to discredit “truth” as one of the “grand narratives” which clever people could no longer bring themselves to believe in. Instead of “the truth”, which was to be rejected as naïve and/or repressive, a new intellectual orthodoxy permitted only “truths” – always plural, frequently personalised, inevitably relativised ... all claims on truth are relative to the particular person making them; there is no position outside our own particulars from which to establish universal truth. This was one of the key tenets of postmodernism ... In this respect, for as long as we have been postmodern, we have been setting the scene for a “post-truth” era.

And these attitudes soon spread across wider society. By the mid-1990s, journalists were following academics in rejecting “objectivity” ... Old-school hacks who continued to adhere to objectivity as their organising principle were scolded ... Under the flag of pragmatism, the professional consensus allowed for a lower-case version of truth, broadly equivalent to academic relativism – which nonetheless dissociated professional journalism from the allegedly anachronistic quest for the one true truth ... Bright young things generated fast-growing revenues by creating a magical system of mythical thinking known in shorthand as “the brand”. Branding came to be seen as far more important than the mundane activity of product design, development and manufacture ... the national economy was reconfigured around whatever the next person was prepared to believe in, which is as close as financial markets ever get to the truth ... this system of managed perceptions and permanent PR – promotional culture as a whole way of life – has now largely replaced the incontrovertible facts of large-scale manufacturing ...

... the political realm experienced parallel developments ... Bill Clinton initiated the transformation of politics into “showbiz for uglies” – a show of inclusivity performed in a series of shared national experiences. In the UK this was exemplified in Tony Blair’s role at the forefront of public reaction to the death of Princess Diana ... By the turn of the century, government was already less about the “truth” than about how “truths” could be spun ... Meanwhile, the art of government was also being dumbed down into “evidence-based” managerialism – the largely exclusive process with which “Washington insider” Hillary Clinton has been unfavourably associated. As further practised by Tony Blair, during his stint as UK prime minister, outgoing US president, Barack Obama, and their respective administrations, the subdivision of politics into (a) cultural experience and (b) management, has made a dual contribution to the social construction of “post-truth”.

As the protagonists neared the role of a priest or pop star in their near-mythical performances, so the Clinton-Blair-Obama triad has moved politics further away from truth and closer to the realm of the imagination. Meanwhile, in the hands of managerialists what was left of the truth – “the evidence base” – was soon recognised by the wider population as a tool for use in social engineering, and largely discredited as a result – hence the mounting hostility towards experts, on which Brexiteer Michael Gove sought to capitalise in the run-up to the EU referendum. On both counts, prominent representatives of the centre-left prepared the ground for the post-politics of “post-truth”. The irony is that some of their closest relatives have been the first casualties of its further realisation.

“Post-truth” is the latest step in a logic long established in the history of ideas, and previously expressed in the cultural turn led by middle-class professionals. Instead of blaming populism for enacting what we set in motion, it would be better to acknowledge our own shameful part in it.

Andrew Calcutt [The Conversation](#) November 18, 2016

2019, February 19: <<[Andrew Waugh](#): **Accepting the fact that there are multiple truths does not mean that everything is true ... it is clear where the facts end and my analysis starts**>> So far as I can see, no one argues that everything is true. The question is whether, in the popular mind, anything can now be true (yes, I’m an elitist too but I extend “populist” to include some of the elites). Populists, scientists, lefties, the mob, the elites, you, me, Uncle Tom Cobley, and all believe we are in the right (and that we are the salt of the earth). Apart from noble minds like yours and mine, Andrew, I don’t accept that the distinction you are making between fact and analysis exists in many of the discourses taking place in the real world (academic, elitist, and populist). Calcutt’s analysis, I believe, deals with real world turmoil not high-minded abstract analysis and searches out origins. Postmodern multiple truths displaced objective truth but left us bereft of ways of telling what is untrue. Postmodernists don’t say “everything is true” but the

consequence is that in lesser minds anything can be true (fact, opinion, or analysis). Truth can be found in multiple narratives (no one needs to tell the father of parallel provenance that) but we still need a yardstick to identify narratives that are untrue.

<< **To take this back to where it started, history**>> Yes, let's do that. To pose the question (more crudely than I hoped would be necessary) it is whether the ADB revision will reflect a post-truth enthusiasm found in some dogmatic postmodern academic history or in the scholarly tradition in which ADB was conceived. I've already said that I have no reason to suppose it won't be kosher. Just asking the question, that's all. Calcutt demonstrates (to my satisfaction) a link between postmodern political manipulation of the evidence base by the elites and the mob's distrust of experts (going beyond climate science to academic history too). Not suggesting for a moment that all experts manipulate the evidence base. But if the mob believes historians are manipulating the evidence base in the History Wars, they will lose their power. It is in their long term interest to reject Dogma, just like Acton said. Is correction of errors in interpretation of Indigenous and Womens' issues in the ADB to be grounded then on populist Dogma or intellectual rigour? It could be either. But wait a moment. Doesn't "populism" apply only to outsiders assaulting mainstream values and not to progressive movements like academic history and #MeToo which uphold those values? Doesn't it differentiate Them from Us?

I suppose I could have chosen examples of left-leaning enthusiasms that display less admirable values (de-platforming, offence outrage, identity politics, megaphone bullying, the Covington kids, and so on). But it doesn't matter because values are not part of any definition of populism that I have seen. For Bryant & Moffit -

... researchers tend to agree populism has two core principles:

- 1. it must claim to speak on behalf of ordinary people*
- 2. these ordinary people must stand in opposition to an elite establishment which stops them from fulfilling their political preferences.*

These ... are combined in different ways with different populist parties, leaders and movements

Other definitions (see Note below) say the same. Populism-

- *emanates from, represents, claims to represent, or appeals to the mob (common, regular, ordinary, little, unsophisticated) rather than elites (institutionalised, dominant, orthodox, rich, intellectual, insiders, business and financial interests)*
- *mobilises the mob into direct action (insurrection) outside of mainstream social/political processes against the dominant elites.*

These definitions are craftily constructed to distinguish between the views and activity of crude, red-neck Trump/Hanson supporters and the suave, bourgeois progressivism of people-like-us (P.L.U's). For a liberal readership, the superior values are implicit. But why can't you be an elitist and a populist at the same time? Because the word is not being defined that way. The definitions distinguish plebian mobs (ordinary people) from patrician activists (elites like us). Both are outsiders trying to change the mainstream - minorities (some privileged, some downtrodden) confronting and seeking to overwhelm the majority in disreputable ways. When they become the majority (or even just a dominant orthodoxy), if their views prevail and become established (displacing what they sought to overturn), they are the new mainstream awaiting the next [Hegelian development](#) from a later generation of insurrectionists.

Do established (majority) views really represent majority opinion anyway or are they merely an indifferent acquiescence (or intimidated submission) on the part of the majority to extreme views held by an elite/minority (cf. Nazism and the "good" Germans debate). Or, is the distinction being made by the definitions between insiders and outsiders (regardless of whether they are in the majority or minority and irrespective of whether they are sophisticated or philistine)? From the perspective of the progressives, the mob are outsiders and they themselves are insiders, but the mob just thinks they're a bunch of And where do the processes of orderly transformation (rather than insurrection) within mainstream political/social activity fit in?

Being "elite" and "established" are two different things. So are those who mobilise direct action in order to confront and change established values/behaviour they disapprove of (trial by media, for example,

when assaulting sexual harassment) in the same boat as those seek aggressively to subvert customary political processes on behalf of marginalized ordinary people? And if everyone in that boat is behaving uncivilly why distinguish between them? Most left-leaning activists are elitist even if they are not (as yet) established and by seeking to overturn established values/behaviours they would seem to fit the definition even if they aspire to be the (new) establishment and believe they soon will be. They are appalled, however, by the idea that regressive (right-leaning) populists speaking (or purporting to speak) for the down-trodden may entertain similar ambitions and might even succeed. But both groups seek to overturn the established order, both behave dishonestly, and both are rowdy.

Two of the six examples I gave in my post of 6 Feb. may already qualify as established, but I think the other four are still in contested space. Brexit is established as the result of a democratic vote and opposition to that result is now insurrectionist. Yes, the vote was close and nearly a third of the electorate stayed home but the result is legitimate. The fight to repeal 18C, on the other hand, appears to be a lost cause, so the consequent loss of free speech is now established. How then are we to understand the other four? Under the Bryant/Moffit definition, populism applies to marginalized masses but not to insurrectionist elites. The sneer is almost palpable. If that definition of populism can't be challenged as a result of the intellectual turmoil these new phenomena are creating for us, does that mean we need two concepts - populism (for Trump and Hanson) and activism (for #MeToo and Australia Day Anxiety)? But doesn't that just beg the question (in its technical sense: [assuming the statement under examination to be true](#)) by treating activist values as mainstream and populist values as insurrectionist?

All change (progressive or regressive) begins with a challenge to the status quo unless it is imposed by external forces or a military coup. No reason to suppose that the same mechanism cannot effect both kinds of change. #MeToo aspires to change attitudes to sexual harassment and thereby eliminate it – an attempt to displace what is now established and to replace it with new attitudes and behaviour. I call this populism because it begins with grass-root opposition to established attitudes and (mis)behaviour (unrelated to social class but not to intellectual elitism) but also because of the trial by media element which is clearly disorderly. The difference is that #MeToo probably wouldn't see themselves as down-trodden outcasts, rather the opposite – they would see themselves (I imagine) not as “ordinary people” but as an oppressed elite (enlightened prophets of a new dawn) or else as ordinary people with superior values (elitism by another name). Does that make them less populist than marginalized Trump supporters from the fly-over States or disenchanting Hansonites from the Bush or Sydney's western suburbs seeking to break a political mould they think devalues them? And is either group likely to be more truthful than the other?

If you label populism using words like “ordinary people” in opposition to “elite establishment” then the term carries the meaning conveyed by those words, but the thing itself may be better understood without those limitations. Lefties, who usually think they are mainstream or, at least, that they hold right-thinking values often win arguments by changing the meaning of a word and then over-bearing anyone who disputes that meaning (never mind whether their preferred meaning bears any relation to customary usage or to the thing itself) – cf. the words “marriage” and “equality” in the campaign to legalise non-heterosexual unions. That is a post-truth tactic now being adopted by the mob (monkey see, monkey do – poetic justice of a kind if it means the biters are now being bit). Indeed *wording* (changing the meaning of words to further an argument for change itself) has become a weapon of choice for populists of all stripes (not just progressive activists). How ironic that a discussion of *populism* requires an exploration of the way populism/activism subverts language! I can accept that populism is coming to denote a narrower view than I would wish but the bottom line is this: do we have more to learn by bringing populism (however defined) into alignment with other disruptive processes of social/political/intellectual change (such as activism, however defined) instead of marginalising it by definition (just as the mob say we marginalise them by word and deed)? **PS** Don't try googling *wording*. I just made it up.

Note: Other definitions of populism can be found in [Meriam-Webster Online](#); [BusinessDictionary.com](#); [Vocabulary.com](#); [Cambridge English Dictionary](#); [Britannica.com](#).

2019, February 20: <<[Deb Leigo \(Mulga\)](#): ...Objectivity needs to be recognised as an impossible achievement, but striven for as much as possible. There one truth, but with multiple prisms / perspectives, sitting beside lies, untruths, mis-truths, deceit and re-imaginings.>>

2019, February 21: Yes – not naïve at all. I'll try to be as clear and succinct as I can. The question is whether doubting objectivity has betrayed us into being careless about Truth. It's about the Rasputin Defence: We can never be free of sin, therefore we can sin as much as we like.

Within the last fortnight, the security/defence community has openly pushed back against the misuse of intelligence by Morrison/Dutton in their campaign against medical evacuations of refugees from offshore camps. They aren't just concerned about distortions and lies. They are concerned at being outed and quoted in support of distortions and lies and about the pollution of the evidence-base it entails. It's not a one off. Howard's misuse of "evidence" in Children Overboard and later in justifying our participation in Iraq War 2 are previous notorious examples. If the intelligence is (mis)used by mendacious politicians, the integrity of the experts is doubted and (worse) the evidence-base itself is brought into disrepute. That is catastrophic.

Substitute "historians" for experts and "history" for evidence-base and "History Wars" for politics and you have the argument in a nutshell. Acton was right, we cannot take this stuff for granted. The Ethics of History cannot be denominational and we must always be on our guard. And the Dogmas against which we have to guard most zealously are the most respectable ones. Forty years ago, I'd have said this was a given. Now I'm not so sure.

2019, March 11: <<[Andrew Waugh](#): Chris, you might be interested in this [Guardian article](#) on the Post-Truth times... The author echos some of the points that you've been arguing. He takes it back to the trial of David Irving in 2000...I find it interesting to think that the last bastion of truth might be the law >>

I do not have anything to do with justice, madam. I sit on a court of appeal, where none of the facts are known. One third of the facts are excluded by normal frailty and memory; one third by the negligence of the profession; and the remaining third by the archaic laws of evidence.

Owen Dixon quoted in J Spigelman [Truth and the Law](#)

Also

La majestueuse égalité des lois, qui interdit au riche comme au pauvre de coucher sous les ponts, de mendier dans les rues et de voler du pain. [In its majestic equality, the law forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets and steal loaves of bread].

[Le Lys Rouge](#) Anatole France *The Red Lily* (1894), ch. 7

And didn't some character in fiction express surprise that history made for such dull reading since most of it is made up?

Where I think the court parallel works is that the law provides a (flawed) process, like the search for truth and the exposure of lies is a process in intellectual discourse, whereby contested views may battle for resolution. Outside of a court, in the realms of history anyway, there is no final answer, no settlement of the case. But despite obstacles to the discovery of facts (secrecy laws, security suppression, defamation laws, access regimes, document destruction, populist obsessions and bullying, scepticism as to the nature of truth, etc. etc.) there is still some scope in our society for "judgement" as Acton calls it and implicit in making a judgement is reaching a conclusion. Not wishing to preach, but that is why Freedom of Thought and Expression is called the first freedom, because it under-lays everything else.

2019, March 15: Still on the question of Dogma. While watching the endless British muddle over Brexit, the adventures of Lemuel Gulliver came to mind:

It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs before we eat them, was upon the larger end: but ... the Emperor ... published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our Histories tell us there have been six rebellions raised on that account, wherein one Emperor lost his life, and another his crown ... It is computed, that eleven thousand persons have, at several times, suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but

the books of the Big Endians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of holding employments
Jonathan Swift *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

Note: For some time now "Brexit" has been in the books as a word (indeed, a year or so ago it was named as word-of-the-year I believe) but it still triggers an error alert when I compose my email.

2019, April 23: Glorification vs Understanding

Some thoughts for ANZAC Week.

The Monash Centre in France proclaims itself to be "a new resource for those travelling to the Australian Remembrance Trail along the Western Front". The website says it is a "cutting-edge multimedia centre [revealing] the Australian Western Front experience through a series of interactive media installations and immersive experiences ... designed so visitors gain a better understanding of the journey of ordinary Australians – told in their own voices through letters, diaries and life-size images." Does travelling the Remembrance Trail, Kokoda, or Gallipoli honour the fallen or obscure their experience in a fog of misunderstanding?

How do we understand the past? It's another dimension to *originality* really. Does the curator merely display or quote from letters, diaries, etc. or jazz them up with life-size images, immersive experiences, and other aids to interpretation? Isn't it part of the curator's job to add the contextual meaning that enhances understanding? It's all part of dealing with memory (including r/keeping as an act of memory). How do we interpret evidence – be it a business transaction or an historical event? What is the difference between fact, interpretation, and spin? How should we regard solemn and/or popular endeavours to celebrate or glorify the past? Should we play the part of kill-joys and deflate such efforts with sober truths (however derived)? Should we stand silently by if people are enjoying themselves and indulge what we know to be historical fictions? How did Catherine the Great really die? What is the truth behind the legend of Bob Hawke and the reflecting pool? Can truth and legend co-exist? Is fake history benign or dangerous? Should taxpayers' money be spent on erudition, display, or theme parks? How do we balance present enjoyment against long-term preservation, entertainment against scholarship? An [opinion piece](#) in the *Guardian* attacking the AWM expansion raises these and other issues:

Australia has not witnessed a more profligate cultural expense proceed with such a shamefully reckless absence of political scrutiny as the proposed half billion dollar expansion of the Australian War Memorial ... both sides of federal politics ... have been cowed into supporting this needless \$498 million project for fear of being seen to disrespect that most overblown shibboleth of Australian national identity, Anzac ... They have been sucker-punched into falling in behind a proposal that is unnecessary, has arguably been devoid of proper executive evaluation and has drawn the ire of everyone from the nation's most esteemed architects, historians and writers to the memorial's own respected former officials ... Where was the rigorous ... scrutiny of this proposal to spend so much money on an institution that has, because it is Anzac's shrine of worship, been quarantined from so many of the budget imposts that have clipped other national cultural institutions including the national library, archives, museum, gallery and portrait gallery, and the Museum of Australian Democracy?

... Public opposition to the proposal – amid some apparent confusion about what, precise, demolition works would take place to provide for the expansion – has been growing. In late March a group of [83 prominent Australians signed a public letter opposing the memorial's expansion](#) on the grounds "they cannot be justified, they show the memorial is being given preference over other national institutions, and the money could be better spent" ... [AWM Director, Brendan Nelson, labels the 83 signatories] "[intellectuals, academics, public servants and a bunch of fellow travellers](#)" ...

Is over-blown memorialisation of the Anzac Legend (if that is what it is here and at the Monash Centre) actually devaluing the worth of the heritage they celebrate? What do we expect from those two institutions - restraint or indulgence? This article is not altogether coherent and the author's reasoning is difficult to unravel (beware the over-use of adverbs), but we can discern three pertinent questions:

1. Who prioritises spending on cultural programmes?
2. On what basis?
3. By what process?

And that is without complicating matters by asking how the pie is divided between Federal, State, and Local programmes.

2020, June 16: What a difference a cash splash makes

On a matter not wholly unrelated to the thread on curatorial integrity, there is news of more opposition to [increased spending on AWM](#) and ideas about that institution's purpose and meaning. Another instance of "purists" speaking out perhaps?

Two former heads of the Australian War Memorial, former ambassadors and several ex-departmental secretaries have called for a reversal of the institution's "grandiose" \$500m expansion plan, saying the money should be redirected to support veterans ... The AWM has attracted significant controversy over its expansion plans, which it says are necessary to better tell the story of modern conflict, display more of its collection, house "planes, helicopters and armoured vehicles" inside galleries, and relieve circulation pressures caused by high visitor numbers ... The submission is signed by former AWM directors Brendon Kelson and Steve Gower, and other ex-AWM staff, including a former manager of collections, Richard Llewellyn, former deputy director Michael McKernan and former senior curator Michael Piggott ...

A spokesman for the AWM said the project would not come at the cost of funding for veterans' welfare. "This is not a case of one or the other, but a commitment to both," he said ...

In a separate submission, Gower described the planned demolition of Anzac Hall as "vandalism" and said the plans did not accord with the vision of Charles Bean, who wanted the memorial to be "not colossal in scale". "It is giantism that could well swamp and destroy the inherent well-recognised heritage value of the site if executed as currently proposed," he said. The submission was made to parliament's standing committee on public works, which is inquiring into the expansion.

Interesting that they want the money directed towards veterans' welfare rather than alternative ways of supporting AWM's "heritage values". Also interesting is the fact that this campaign seems to be coming from within our ranks (if I may describe the objectors as such) rather than from the public. It's open to the criticism that purists (elitists) are deciding what's good for the public and wanting to deprive them of some harmless taxpayer-funded entertainment, isn't it? What price communicating our message?

2020, July 29: [Nobody here but us public servants](#)

The Australian War Memorial warned volunteers they would lose their jobs if they speak publicly or "like" social media comments about its controversial \$500m expansion project. The memorial has [faced much public scrutiny](#) over its costly redevelopment plans, which include demolishing and rebuilding the award-winning Anzac Hall and creating a glass area to house large objects such as an F/A18 Hornet, reconnaissance aircraft, and armoured vehicles. Critics, including former memorial directors, say the redevelopment is excessive, unnecessary and "totally inappropriate".

Earlier this month, an email from a memorial staff member was sent to a distribution list for family history volunteers, which directed them not to speak publicly about the redevelopment. The email, first [reported by the Canberra Times](#), warned that doing so could cost volunteers their jobs.

Under the subheading "We are all public servants", the memorial warned: "This is a timely reminder that as Memorial volunteers you should not publically [sic] comment on the development. "This includes not providing comment on radio via talk back shows, commenting in the newspaper such as in the Letters to the Editor section, or commenting on a link or discussion on such social media as Facebook or Twitter. "This includes not clicking 'Like' to someone else's comment." ...

We know there are limits on what employees (not just public servants) can say. We see it inhibiting and crippling professional discourse in journals, at conferences, and (dare I say it) on this list. But the institutions apply this far more widely than they need to. They're not usually so draconian when an employee speaks in praise of what they're doing - so the restrictions are applied sparingly to uphold approved opinion, not just negatively to suppress dissent. The piety and uncton of the Memorial's appeal to general principles should disarm those tempted to think that this is simply about disarming criticism. During the lockdown, I'm spending more time than usual reading and rereading. Thought policing is an aspect of more than one of the threads currently running on this list and, as I began to doze off last night, my eye fell on the following passage from Crane Brinton's *A Decade of Revolution 1789-1799* (1934) Ch.6 "The Republic of Virtue"-

... For Citizen X is not really free when he commits an unrepugnant act, or thinks an unrepugnant thought. Freedom consists, not in doing what one wants to do, but in doing what is right. The general will of the Republic is right. The Committee of Public Safety knows what the general will is. To obey the Committee, therefore, is to obey one's better self, to be really free. To disobey the Committee is to obey one's worse self, to be a slave. When the Committee interferes with a citizen selfishly following his particular and erring will it is, in Rousseau's words, forcing him to be free. When it cuts off the head of a very recalcitrant citizen, it is presumably also freeing him. Had not Bellarmine argued that it was a positive benefit to a heretic to kill him, because the longer he lived the more damnation he acquired? ...

2020, August 16: [A battle for the nation's memory](#)

... In recent years the AWM has been accused of overstepping its charter, which requires it to "remember, interpret and understand" Australian war experiences. It has begun to hold exhibitions about current conflicts. It has [accepted sponsorship](#) from weapons maker BAE Systems. Most controversially of all, it is now the subject of a bitter battle over a \$500 million redevelopment plan that Brendon Kelson (a director of the Memorial in the 1990s who is not to be confused with Brendan Nelson) has [described](#) as an "act of architectural vandalism".

All this raises significant questions about how the Memorial should contribute to our understanding of conflict. How do you fund public institutions in the midst of a recession? How do you recognise multi-faceted modern conflict, including peacekeeping, that escapes the historical definition of war? And is our most famous museum a shrine to sacrifice or a tourist attraction that glorifies war?

On one side is the AWM's powerful chairman, media and mining baron Kerry Stokes, and former AWM director Brendan Nelson ... On the other stand historians and some veterans, as other Canberra institutions face budget pressures with scarce resources available. Admiral Chris Barrie, a former chief of the Australian Defence Force, has heard from many veterans who find they are dragged down rather than uplifted by big memorials and commemorations. "[The government] builds more edifices like [the Monash Centre on the Western Front](#) and this sort of thing – that's not helping them, that's not helping their families, it's not helping to repair the damage we've done," Barrie says ...

AWM director Matt Anderson says the development is vital to keep the Memorial relevant and tell the stories of those who put themselves in harm's way for Australia. He argues updating and improving the museum areas deepens the commemorative experience ...

War historian Joan Beaumont has concerns about the opaque way the \$500 million was allocated, especially when other institutions like the National Archives, National Gallery and National Library are cutting staff, collections and services. The National Gallery has recently called for redundancies from its 300 staff, with one in 10 jobs to go. The Library has [stopped collecting material on Japan, Korea and mainland South-east Asia](#) and is also likely to shed jobs in a major restructure ... "There's an ongoing debate here as to whether we should be remembering other narratives of Australian history and why we commemorate war as central to our national identity and culture," she says ...

Members of the Heritage Guardians group campaigning against the development told the parliamentary committee in a July hearing they believed the expansion would in part serve as a personal legacy for Nelson. Former AWM principal historian Professor Peter Stanley decried it to the committee as "a slapdash and, frankly, unprofessional proposal". Critics also raise Nelson's role in accepting donations from weapons makers including Lockheed Martin, Thales, BAE Systems, Boeing and Leidos, which [some feel is inappropriate](#) for a site commemorating those who died in war. Boeing made Nelson president of its Australian, New Zealand and South Pacific operations in January, after he left the Memorial ...

Hmmmm, "relevance"? "commemorative experience"? where have I heard that sort of thing before used as a defence of records as a celebration, of the custodian's mission to purposefully shape their meaning for an ideological outcome? When does the archivist become the servant of the State in shaping the national identity? Is "interpret and understand" different from enjoy and identify? Perhaps our internationally accredited and acclaimed expert could give us a clue -

... an important part of an archives is access and it is having those public programs that make sure that the archival collection is promoted; that all citizens of New South Wales are aware that this fantastic asset exists; and that access to the collection is made as enjoyable and as engaging as is possible, including outreach into education programs to get younger citizens engaged and involved with the history and their identity.

2020, November 22: Commemorating war

Reactions to the Afghanistan War Crimes Report are, of course, diverse. Shock and horror mixed with varying levels of denial ranging from the rotten apple defence (the system is good but a few rogues went off the reservation) to the everyone-does-it defence (yes, we erred but we aren't the only ones, or the worst). There's even a tone of self-congratulation creeping in (aren't we good for owning up to our mistakes).

On Saturday on the [front page of the SMH](#) (also in the Age), ex Defence Force Chief Chris Barrie (linking the Affair to current criticism of AWM governance) wants "exhibits about the Special Air Service Regiment removed from public display while the Memorial considers its response to a comprehensive inquiry into their conduct.". This raises the question of the right curatorial tone when memorialising war, something I imagine AWM has had to fret over since its inception. How do you commemorate war without glorifying it? This is a problem for us all but especially for AWM which does little else. AWM tells the story of [crimes committed against Australian soldiers](#) but the story of [crimes committed by Australian soldiers](#) is trickier.

It's not new and it's well attested – e.g. [Breaker Morant](#), [Surafend](#), [Bita Paka](#), [Vietnam](#), and many more. If commemorations are to be de-platformed while we consider our response when will that be? What will be left to memorialise? Underlying it all is the concept of "war crime" – a very slippery beast. No doubt, there are statutory provisions, policies, handbooks, conventions, etc a-plenty which will be used in this case but at a basic moral level what as a society do we accept as legitimate and what not? And, like all other social mores bearing on curatorship, how do we deal with changing sensibilities over time?

The current commentary is focusing on "unlawful" killing. War is about State-sanctioned killing. What does it matter what the State sanctions? The mediaeval churchman tried to establish "[God's Truce](#)" and "[Just War](#)" as a way of mitigating the violence knowing they couldn't eliminate it. That's why it matters. Those were the theologians, not the Church militant, as witness the Bishop asked how to [distinguish heretics from good Catholics](#) who is said to have screamed "Kill them all! Kill them all! God will know his own."

We cherish the ANZAC Myth – valiant, selfless Australians who should be honoured and celebrated – sneakily proud of their reputation for valour. But how can we suppose that the 39 killings (that we know about) stop there? If we're going to be honest and face up to Truth, doesn't AWM and all of us need to "face up" to the fact that alongside bravery and sacrifice terrible things are done by our soldiers (irrespective of what is lawful)? And shouldn't that be part of the memory too?

2020, November 25: From [today's SMH](#)

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has promised the Australian War Memorial council would have "oversight" of any move to acknowledge alleged war crimes by Australia's special forces, despite its director saying curators and historians would be given free rein. Mr Morrison said the War Memorial's council has "a lot of people with a lot of experience" who would "exercise appropriate judgment" on future plans to recognise the Brereton inquiry's findings ...

... the War Memorial's director Matt Anderson said the institution was a "place of truth", and its curatorial and historical teams would be given the freedom to "arrive at the best treatment of the subjects". Mr Morrison said there had to be a presumption of innocence for the soldiers accused of war crimes, and pointed out there was not yet any specific proposal from the War Memorial ...

In his interview with his masthead, Mr Anderson said while the council was responsible for all activities and policies of the War Memorial, "the practice is that they leave the curatorial decisions to the subject matter experts" ... "The council has every trust in our curatorial and historical teams and gives them free range to arrive at the best treatment of the subjects."

<<Andrew Waugh: The Chairman (*) of the AWM council is Kerry Stokes. He's funding the libel action bought by one of the soldiers that has been reported to have been involved in war crimes against the media outlets that reported it. He's also stated that a fund that he does not control would be available to fund the defence of any soldiers prosecuted for war crimes. A former director of the AWM, Brendan Kelson, has stated that Stokes' position is consequently untenable. A position [rejected by the Prime Minister.](#) (*)

According to the AWM website, the official title of the position. Incidentally, spare a thought for the historians currently employed by the Defence Department to write the history of the Afghanistan action. Not only will they have to address the Brereton findings, presumably before any cases go to court, but they will also have to accept that the fundamental operational reports that they rely on have been found to be deliberate lies. Unfortunately, a perfect example of why archivists distinguish between reliability, authenticity, and integrity. These records are authentic, and have retained integrity, but are not reliable.>>

Scott Morrison said [there must be a "presumption of innocence" for Australia's soldiers](#)
[Last week, the Australian Financial Review reported that Mr Stokes had promised to help members of the Special Air Service regiment through an existing special fund that could, among other things, cover legal costs](#)

Should the nation's memory of this be framed in a court of law? Scott Morrison seems to think so. But isn't the crucial memory already framed by the Brereton Report – four years of painstaking inquiry and research in the making? Are its careful conclusions to be regarded as tentative pending court proceedings or as authoritative – not as to the accused's guilt or innocence but as to what happened? Not the last word (there's never a last word) but a weighty and substantial assessment that can't be dismissed.

Why are we not hearing from the deniers and the triumphalists much that indicates [empathy for the Afghans](#) who endured the atrocities? Why are we not hearing more from them about the courage of those soldiers who spoke up and tried to stop it? What about asking Mr Stokes to set up a fund to support the whistle-blowers, whose ordeal will undoubtedly be as trying as that of the accused and the dishonoured?

[My Lai](#) was arguably the most notorious and (eventually) the best documented atrocity of the Vietnam War. Only one person ([William Calley](#)) was convicted and he got off lightly. The person who was arguably more to blame was Calley's superior ([Ernest Medina](#)) who did most to instill the veins-in-your-teeth culture that probably sparked the massacre. Even then, some of the perpetrators seemingly just went along with those driven by blood-lust. The ones on the ground (e.g. [Hugh Thompson](#)) who tried to stop the killing, and were called traitors by Congressman [Mendel Rivers](#), came from other units.

It is quite likely that convictions here will be just as [hard to obtain and sustain](#). So, the way the legal process pans out may be largely immaterial in shaping the memory. But, then, very few aspects of the Anzac Legend have been judicially adjudicated. Nor, if it comes to that, have many other historical memories. And those that have (Joan of Arc, Thomas More, Martin Luther, Jan Huss, etc.) seldom belong to the lawyers in the long run anyhow. The development of this memory has already begun. The outcome of any legal process will be part of it but I very much doubt that it will be the last word. It is how we handle the memory from this point on, not how the judicial system deals with it, that counts. And I rather suspect that it will turn out to be another one of those contested memories.

2020, November 27: [Opinion piece](#) in today's SMH by Frank Bongiorno (professor and head of the School of History at the Australian National University. He is a former president of [Honest History](#)).

... there is never any shortage of education experts. Teachers spend years learning to be teachers, but many of us feel fully qualified to tell them how to do their jobs. Museum curators suffer similarly ... Yet when Prime Minister Scott Morrison was asked about how the Australian War Memorial should respond to the Brereton report on alleged war crimes in Afghanistan, he reassured us that the War Memorial's council had "oversight" and would work with the director Matt Anderson to ensure an appropriate response.

The council is chaired by Kerry Stokes, a businessman who has undertaken to help SAS members accused of war crimes and is currently bank-rolling a defamation action against Nine (owner of this masthead) by Victoria Cross winner Ben Roberts-Smith ... The council also includes former Liberal prime minister Tony Abbott. Otherwise, its governing body comprises mainly military or ex-military personnel. There is nobody with specialist historical or museum expertise.

This is in itself unfortunate for an institution that claims to combine "a shrine, a world-class museum, and an extensive archive", with a mission to lead "remembrance and understanding of Australia's wartime experience" ... The current director, Matt Anderson ... has a good understanding of the only way an institution such as the War Memorial can operate professionally and independently. Curatorial decisions

about how the War Memorial will respond to the Brereton report, Anderson explains, are to be left to “the subject matter experts” ...

We’ve been here before. Twenty years ago, the National Museum of Australia was stalked by an energetic campaign of the culture warriors, whom the Howard government ensured had solid representation on its council. As the museum moved towards opening day in its new building, right-wing council members were reviewing and criticising exhibition content. The National Museum was mired for years in unproductive culture wars, becoming a regular topic for “expert” analysis by the commentariat ... every curator ... understands that they are only ever a label away from more controversy

The War Memorial’s ... previous director, Dr Brendan Nelson...unwisely entered the controversy over possible war crimes in Afghanistan when criticising the media over its treatment of Roberts-Smith. Nelson dismissed it as an attempt to “tear down our heroes”...The War Memorial has also maintained a gallery on the war in Afghanistan, knowing full well that there were troubling matters seeping into the public sphere ...

The Afghanistan war is not the only conflict in which Australians might have committed war crimes. There are incidents in Charles Bean’s *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* that disclose breaches of the rules of war ... if [AWM] is to become the “place of truth” ... it will need explore the darker side of Australians at war as an urgent matter of honest history and national self-reckoning.

Are we entitled to this kind of trust? What would culture warriors and revisionists (e.g. BLM) think about those comments? We are entitled, I think to have our expertise acknowledged and respected but (as we have seen in another thread) we can’t always be trusted. So, we remain open to having our judgements challenged. What is odious about Morrison’s comments is the implied dismissal of expert opinion. But, as Bongiorno implies, the question is how can we respond to the challenge - adjusting to the pressure, resisting it, taking sides, fighting back?

2020, December 8: As predicted, [the push-back](#) is beginning to conflate historical truth and criminal conviction –

... The ADF has walked back General Campbell's initial pledge to strip the Meritorious Unit Citation from 3000 special forces troops. However, controversy still lingers over the recommendation from the war crimes report ... “I find this so unAustralian. You’re already saying these guys are guilty, that you’re investigating,” Senator Lambie said ... “You’re saying all 3000 are guilty ... Back it off until we know who is proven guilty.”

The Tasmanian senator stood alongside Mr Russell, who runs soldiers’ support community Voice Of A Veteran ... “The lowest of the low is that you continue to stand here and accuse them of crimes they’re about to stand in an investigation, and must stand in court. No one, including the Prime Minister, is judge and jury,” Mr Russell said ... there’s been a four and a half year inquiry that has been conducted, and what we need to do now is ... allow those accused to be afforded the presumption of innocence.” Mr Russell also questioned how the report was compiled. “There are so many questions [about the Brereton report], such as immunity being provided, people not medically sound being interviewed,” he said

The Brereton Report is about more than the identification of a few alleged criminals. It is about the conduct of special forces operations in Afghanistan irrespective of whether culprits can be identified and prosecuted. It is an evaluation of the history of those operations but it is already clear that, if no convictions are recorded, some will say the evaluation is flawed - that it never happened.

So, what follows if there are no convictions? Does that mean that no atrocities occurred? Does it mean the historical evaluation reached by Brereton is untrue (or unproven)? Will the historical truth of the Report be negated by a lack of convictions, weakened, or be unaffected? Did Richard III murder his nephews? A [mock trial](#) conducted some years ago failed to convict. That has not stopped many historians (almost all, in fact) and members of the public from concluding that he did or probably did. And the King also has his defenders (myself, I’ve always thought the D. of Buckingham was the most likely culprit) but the only sensible conclusion is we’ll never know. But there are many degrees of historical certainty not dependent on criminal conviction (indeed, if that were the bench-mark, there’d be very little history left). Is the historical truth of the [einsatzgruppen massacres](#) negated by the relatively few prosecutions and convictions? Does it depend on social context – few deniers for Nazi atrocities but the Anzacs are a different kettle of fish.

We can be sure that the Afghanistan Affair has a long way yet to go and that passions will run high. So far as our bailiwick is concerned (and I'm open to correction here) it seems to be based mostly on oral testimony and hearsay rather than documentary evidence. Pity the house of memory then in a post-Truth age that must evaluate the facts and deal with disputation over the meaning of the facts as well as disputation over what the facts are ("people not medically sound being interviewed"). The underlying issue (by no means a new one) is how to deal with controversy. Should a house of memory endeavour to be neutral (not take a position so as not to offend anyone, as if that is even possible), impartial (take a fair and independent view, and brave the blow-back), socially responsible (deferring to the dominant view, or the one most likely to shout loudest), or just run like hell?

2020, 11 June: What a difference a word makes (1)

There is uproar over use of the word "[occupation](#)" to describe the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453. Meanwhile, Saudi school children will now be taught to regard Ottoman rule over the peninsula as an "[occupation](#)" rather than an outpost of the caliphate. The word "[racism](#)" is to be re-defined in Merriam-Webster. The term "[Israeli cuisine](#)" is condemned as a form of cultural appropriation. Meanwhile [statue rows](#) are breaking out all over, [even here](#) (unsurprisingly, some would say).

If meaning and memory are being suffused within an homogenized reimagining, the struggle to understand our past becomes submerged within a struggle to understand our present. Ah ha, I hear you say, 'twas ever thus. I am not sure, however, that [ideological intent](#) (the weaponization of facts and artefacts or, in the alternative view, their reconceptualization, hardly their neutralization) was ever so overt or that self-consciousness has always been so aggressively over-borne by self-righteousness.

[Revisionism](#) can mean opposing thesis with antithesis in the hope of reaching synthesis as the next step along the road to understanding. Custodians of meaning and memory have an especially difficult path to tread because we are simultaneously looking for understanding ourselves and trying to help others to do so. Is it possible that our own voyage of discovery becomes an obstacle to serving others in theirs? Jenkinson, I think, would say yes.

I have told before how I once had a row with Sue McKemish and Marg Burns over introduction of the word "[patriarchal](#)" into a description of executive government in 19th century Victoria. My objection then was that the word was anachronistic (belonging to the 20th century and out of place when documenting a colonial administration) but Merriam Webster claims it was used as far back as 1632. I think of it now (and possibly then at a subconscious level) as being a dispute over reinterpretation.

I think this problem (supposing you agree with me that it is a problem) is more acute now than it was then and from retirement I congratulate you all for living in interesting times.

<<[Michael Piggott](#): [Coincidental to Chris' reflections on words and their shifting meanings and uses, I've recently happened upon the term "sousveillance" as explained by Ethan Zuckerman drawing on its coining by inventor Steve Mann. See "Why filming police violence has done nothing to stop it" in the "MIT Technology Review". The piece is also fascinating in illustrating the importance of the social context of recordkeeping...>>](#)

2020, June 12: You don't have to agree with Howard/Abbott rhetoric about black-armband history to feel unease about the revisionism being expressed during the current excitement vented on cultural artefacts like [GWTW](#) and *Birth of a Nation* or on statuary like that of [Baden-Powell](#) or [WSC](#). Why these? Why now? Of course, it's being driven by pent up frustrations and long standing rage over systemic racism and murder, by un-righted wrongs, and by the persistent evasions of over-bearing power. Those immediate causes are prompting an upsurge of long-held grievance that is over-flowing into a kind of solidarity movement amongst those who are sympathetic. It's become a vehicle for expressing various discontents that is sweeping up many from the usually disorganised (and often apathetic) mainstream and from the commonly quiescent amongst the affluent. Will it last? Who knows? I'm reading Rapport's [1848](#) which tells how liberal and nationalist elements initially prevailed and then fragmented, turned to in-fighting, persecuted minorities, and finally prompted a reaction from the respectable against

the outrages of the most extreme elements. Will there be a reaction now? Will apathy and disorganisation return?

I'm troubled by the enthusiasm because I doubt its intellectual integrity and I grieve that skepticism is not the norm. The well springs of rage are genuine enough but the focus is distorted. You may dismiss me for not understanding the connection between a statue and oppression, but I might just as well dismiss you for not understanding the difference. There are no revisionist doubts being vented now that aren't already known (or knowable). We've always known (or at least have no good reason not to) that books and films distort and misrepresent the past.

- We know that Churchill was an enthusiastic supporter of terror bombing, first [against Iraqi tribesmen](#), then against [Germany](#) and (if he'd been able to) against the [Irish](#).
- We know that Baden-Powell [starved the blacks](#) in Mafeking to feed the whites and there is evidence he [covered up violence](#) against blacks in Rhodesia.

And many, many more.

Why do we have to wait for an upsurge of outrage for myths and distortions to be finessed? Why are skepticism and a sense of proportion so conspicuously absent from the common sensibility and from our education systems? Should our everyday work of keeping memory and materials be based on a transitory, passionate [ideological commitment](#) or on an enduring passion for [empirical truth](#)? Now, there's a dichotomy for you – one that is quite possibly false.

2020, 12 June: What a difference ... (2) Statue wars

And now, here's something from the odd sock drawer:

Russia said it would launch a criminal investigation on Friday after Czech officials removed [a statue of a Soviet-era general in Prague](#). The bronze statue of Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev was taken down last week to make way for a World War II memorial, prompting the Russian embassy to protest. City officials in the Czech capital said the statue would be moved to another site. Removal of Soviet statues by Western-leaning countries once loyal to Moscow often sparks outrage in Russia as a visible sign of its waning influence. On Thursday, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu wrote to his Czech counterpart Lubomir Metnar asking him to hand over the statue to Russia ...

Prague district 6 mayor Ondrej Kolar told the Czech CTK news agency that Konev's statue would be placed in a "museum dedicated to the history of the 20th century in Czechoslovakia." Pro-Russian Czech President Milos Zeman echoed Russian outrage over the move as "an abuse of the state of emergency," referring to a government-imposed lockdown due to the coronavirus. The statue was first put up in 1980, seven years after Konev's death.

A nice illustration of the difference between publicly flaunting toxic assets and hiding them discretely away. And how depressing that a memory institution is used for the latter purpose..

<<[Mark Brogan](#): **The post modernists amongst us will no doubt revel in the notion of false dichotomy. But as a profession, we stand for the integrity of memory. What precisely should ASA be doing in response to the current crisis in memory caused by the destruction and desecration of monuments? After all, it's a small step from this to the sanitisation of documentary memory ...>> Yeah. Winston Smith is alive and well. How can I sanitise memory, let me count the ways.**

- Pressure groups organized around political correctness and religious conservatism [lead textbook publishers to self-censor](#). Such self-censorship ultimately results in dry, unenlightening textbooks. Lifeless material draws education away from more developed forms of teaching history. This study demonstrates how textbook publishers' censoring textbooks fosters a teaching of history that degrades knowledge and promotes specific ideologies.
- If you're unfamiliar with "[historical nihilism](#)" here's a little background. It's China's term for public scepticism about the Communist Party's version of past events. It's an expression that has been getting a lot of play in China in recent years, since the Party launched a campaign against historical nihilism – basically, against anything critical of the Party's legacy, its past leaders or its leadership.

- ... the opponents of free speech can [drown out ideas and language they don't like](#) by using robotic tools, fake accounts, or teams of real people operating multiple accounts. They can flood the information space with false, distracting or irrelevant information so that people have trouble understanding what is real and what is fake.
- Hundreds of teachers and students are engaged in protests against the new school board's proposal to form [a review committee](#), tasked with ensuring curricula focus on topics that promote patriotism, respect for authority and free enterprise. More specifically, the committee will identify and weed out materials that "[encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law.](#)" ... [The New York Times](#) reports one student saying, "You can't erase our history. It's not patriotic." Some see banning topics that "encourage or condone civil disorder" as akin to relegating iconic figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and César Chávez—as well as less well-known crusaders for justice—to the margins of our national memory. Others are asking how any U.S. history class *cannot* involve nuanced engagement with the civil rights movement, labor movements and other pivotal events in the long march for justice.

etc. etc. etc.

Our focus (I think) should not be on controlling or correcting how information is used or misused but on the integrity of sources. That is what we stand for, isn't it? Standing up for open-ness is all well and good but I think a stand against censorship, partiality, distortion, and suppression is even better and right up our alley. Or should be. Can it happen to us? It already has. Look back at earlier threads on toxic assets.

2020, June 13: <<Andrew Waugh: Statues are never historical *evidence* - at least not in the way that the posters in this list seem to think - and it follows that their removal is not destroying history>>

<<Statues, and other commemoration sites, are invariably erected later than the event they commemorate. At best they are historical evidence that a group in society considered the event worthy of commemoration. They are a symbol for the values and beliefs of that group.>> They are that but they are also a memory of the past. No different (in essence) to any other (a book, a play, a TV show). This "poster to the list" has never thought of them any other way (or suggested otherwise, I believe). I think this point is facile. Statues aren't history, they are (to use Andrew's own term) commemorations. The history involved here is not the seed event(s) but the battle over memory of them.

<<it follows that their removal is not destroying history>> I would use the word "reshaping history" rather than "destroying history". I can't see how removing a statue is materially different to controlling other interpretations of history by proscribing the contents of text books, drowning out contrary discourse, howling down or bowdlerising unwelcome interpretations, or withdrawing an episode of *Fawlty Towers*. The only possible moral difference is between the motives of those who celebrate slavers and those who decry them. The question for us, therefore, is what motives and values should we bring to the making and keeping of records of slavery. It is a question of how we stand professionally in relation to culture wars because, as Mark says, if we stand by today, tomorrow they may come for us. We don't erect statues to Adolf Hitler but the [rehabilitation of Genghis Khan](#) is going gang busters. As recordkeepers do we care? If we do, [what are the limits?](#)

We cannot comfortably design a better system for documenting the number of heads being processed through the gas chambers as if good recordkeeping (in a technical sense) can be divorced from the uses to which it is put. We cannot forget that Trotsky was airbrushed out of a photograph or that Winston Smith was an archivist.

You'll notice that I slyly slipped in *Fawlty Towers* onto my list – an artefact rather than a commemoration.

<<As a symbol to one group it is inevitable that they are an anti-symbol to other groups that do not share those values and beliefs. The iconography, for example, of the Captain Cook statues has been well covered in *The Conversation*.>> That's no reason to take sides. Whatever we think personally, our professional stance must be as agnostic as we can possibly be towards cultural values and beliefs. Even those of us arguing for a more socially responsible use of records on behalf of the marginalised and downtrodden

have never suggested tampering with the record (at least not so I've heard). Remaining agnostic is uncomfortable and unpalatable to many of us but I can't see how we can do our job any other way and I've yet to hear a convincing argument on how we can combine curatorial integrity with other values and beliefs. Cold-bloodedly separating them is impossible. We're human after all. But that is no reason not to try. There are limits, as I indicated at Winnipeg in 2001, so it is a matter of where those limits lie.

<<That this symbolism is current, not just historical, is shown by the fury generated when the symbol is damaged, removed, or even suggested for removal.>> Doesn't recognising that the symbolism is current make it even more urgent that we reject it in our work? If we subscribe to contemporary bias how can we recognise and deal effectively with historical bias except in ideological terms?

<<it is essentially impossible to get these bad aspects even *mentioned* on the plaques at the site, let alone have a balanced view of the person or event.>> I agree, Contextualisation for the purpose of "balance" is just a mealy-mouthed way to reinterpret history. I'm all for contextualisation (I'm the Description Guy, after all) but this is a discussion about the purpose of contextualisation.

<<This is perfectly in accordance with our values and practices as recordkeepers and archivists. We destroy at least 95% of all records created when they outlive their purpose. Even records that have made it into archives are subject to reappraisal and can be deaccessioned.>> And we worry about this don't we? Does our selection fairly represent the past is a totally different question to should we reshape the archive to better reflect contemporary values and beliefs. How can we reshape and explain the material to better reflect what they mean? Our descriptive and appraisal practices are continually influenced by our perception of the changing values of society (then and now) but the paramount determinants of our practices must be recordkeeping values not cultural ones. One purpose of our contextualisation is to amplify the bias of the records-maker not to smother it.

So far, this has all been about self-conscious bias. I'm waiting for someone to post about the recordkeeper's unconscious bias.

2020, June 14: Whence comes the idea that [offending statuary should be consigned to museums](#)? Are they less offensive when put in a vault or display space in a memory institution rather than left in the open? Should we be offended because it shows people believe that what goes on in our space doesn't really matter? Should we invite attack so we can validate ourselves with the thought that a museum is as important to people as a public square? [Perhaps we soon will be.](#)

Churchill told the Palestine Royal Commission that he did not admit wrong had been done to Native Americans or aboriginal Australians as "a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place".

In the context in which those words were spoken, Jewish displacement of the Palestinians should be seen as equally offensive. But it's not. Outrage too is discriminatory. Voices are being raised that spreading the focus of fury will "[decentre](#)" black-on-white oppression. Dissent among the dissenters. Are any values (established or insurrectionary) stable and enduring? Of course not.

What then do we stand for – continuity or change? Universal values or exceptionalism? If we stand aloof, we detach our work from its social context. If we do not, we must explain and relate our work (in some way or another) to current controversies – we must join the fray, take sides, and (maybe) cease to be safe spaces. I am frankly amazed that GLAM institutions that house the most enduring memories haven't yet been targeted. Ethnic cleansing is much more focused – they go for libraries, archives, and museums first.

So, should we embrace "heritage laws" that protect us and what we curate from the fury? Or, should we (bravely) proclaim that we are seamlessly part of our society and that toxic assets we hold should be treated no differently to any others and they should not be specially protected? What rationale would we use to justify special treatment?.

<<Andrew Waugh: ... The thing that sticks in my craw is "Whatever we think personally, our professional stance must be as agnostic as we can possibly be towards cultural values and beliefs." IMHO, this is where

we diverge. No. As a memory professional I'm not going to be agnostic towards the cultural values and beliefs of slavery, for example. Or racial suppression. Or genocide ... when applied to commemorative objects in situ this ignores the fact that the objects are not in the past. They are in our present and still say "This person or event is worthy of commemoration". They are not just an historic view of a person or event, but a current view as well ... The key here is that by removing the commemorative object from its situation, we are changing it from being a commemoration to being evidence of commemoration>> I suppose it could be argued that artefacts in public places are provocatively commemorative – intended to glorify and endorse - whereas those kept in memory houses are more reflective, innocently straight forward, inclusive and nuanced - not celebratory at all - and, what is even more important, are seen as such by an otherwise infuriated populace. And, even better, it's OK to be condemnatory. Indeed, that is what you do seem to be arguing. That's fine, so long as our "evidencing" doesn't inflame anyone who is likely to attack us, I suppose. So, we're safe. We can transport toxic assets into a more rarefied context. We can take sides. We can even assume a moral posture. So long as we don't alienate people like us, maybe? But no! There is a long chronicle of controversial exhibitions in [art galleries](#) and [museums](#) (many about controversial sponsorship) but others include-

- Deaccessioning white, male artists to diversify a collection
- Removing the figure of a "comfort woman" featured in an exhibition dealing with censorship in Japan (no less!)
- Unapologetic celebration of Belgium's colonial legacy
- Banning the term "[Golden Age](#)" when describing 17th century Dutch commerce
- Sanitising [torture](#) in a Washington museum

Indeed, there's an online thesis that argues: [museums and controversy, you can't have one without the other](#). I think this all means that GLAM has street cred, after all. It gets worse for us when a house of memory is perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be [taking sides](#) in contemporary controversy or pushing a party line. We may take comfort from the thought that traditionally users of archives are fewer and less bolshie. The Internet may change that. I'm not deprecating your ethical standards, Andrew, but I can't see how attacking slavery in a house of memory is materially different from attacking it in the street. My question though is this. When we are attacked, how do we defend ourselves? By saying we took no line or by saying we took the correct one?

2020, 15 June: What a difference ... (3) Black lives matter

<<IMHO, this is where we diverge.>> If we're swapping humble opinions, here's mine: an agnostic account of the facts of slavery is far more devastating than a passionate denunciation. But this too is just another personal opinion (mine in this case) and nothing to do with curatorial integrity. It would (if correct) be an incidental consequence of curatorial integrity, not its purpose.

You may say that Harriet Beecher Stowe proves me wrong, but what made [Uncle Tom's Cabin](#) an effective diatribe was not its moralistic preaching (of which there is much) but the artfully contrived [appearance](#) that it gave a factual account of the condition of anti-bellum slavery in the South. It was then and has since been denounced as a falsification of slavery, defended by HBS herself as having been based on the testimony of former slaves, sneered at by critics for being "sentimental", and condemned for promoting racist stereotypes (affectionate, dark-skinned mammies, pickaninnies, and dutiful, long-suffering retainers). It has been through the furnace of the whole range of moral relativism, revisionism, and cultural tribalism, in fact. It has even been nominated as one of his good-bad books by George Orwell (no less). To my mind, however, its power over the many, many readers it affected in its time came not from what it is but from what those readers believed it to be – quite simply, true.

We need to position ourselves on the right side of history (or, at least, give the appearance of doing so) without being too blatant about it. So, maybe both sides of this are proved right in the end. To be effective, stick to the truth. If you can fake that, you're home.

2020, June 16: <<Mark Brogan: ... Acknowledging that statues constitute a kind of evidence and that archivists see themselves as players in the evidence and memory game, we have to ask ourselves, should

we engage with this debate or remain on the sidelines? Do we have skin in the game? Purists will say no ...,>> Speaking as purist. I trust people understand (even if they will not allow) the distinction between personal values and professional values. which is what I take this thread to be about. I share my interior life with my friends, not with my peers. Perhaps that's why I have so few friends. My little joke about faking truth would be deplorable in any other context. And, as it happens, I don't think we should fake the truth even on professional grounds – too much danger of being found out (a utilitarian reason rather than a moral one).

<<But this is a little tricky ... spill over effects from the culture wars over memory and memorialisation are already with us ... Archivists have been working with sensitive evidence ... for many years and have methods and approaches that are of value in the context of the current debate ... Communicating them, would seem like a sensible option at this point in time.>> Agreed. Wholeheartedly. A big hurrah for that. But first we need to be sure (very, very sure) that we have a professional consensus (or as near as all get out) on what these methods and approaches are. And for my money, communicating them would be anything but remaining “on the sidelines”.

2020, June 28:

Contextualising slavery

The demand from BLM on houses of memory is essentially to buy into the race relations trauma of the U.S. and to incorporate slavery into a narrative of White oppression there that extends beyond 1865. This narrative, while not untrue and certainly not irrelevant for those living there, has a complexity of focus and of purpose (ideological, political, and moral) which can be sustained only by constraining the historical (and current) facts about slavery within tightly defined parameters to uphold a particular view of the present and to avoid "de-centring" the Black struggle.

- The North American [slave trade](#) was a sub-set of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade which was itself a sub-set of African slavery carried on by non-Whites.
- [Chattel slavery](#) was abolished in the modern world largely through the efforts of Whites, one reason Black leaders wanted to raise [African American regiments](#) in the Civil War (so emancipation would come partly through their own efforts).
- Slavery in the U.S. gave rise not only to oppression but also to the [politics of violence](#).
- Viewing [race-relations](#) **solely** through the prism of post-colonialism is a distortion.

Slavery in Africa

Slavery [in historical Africa](#) was practiced in many different forms: Debt slavery, enslavement of war captives, military slavery, slavery for prostitution, and criminal slavery ... Slavery for domestic and court purposes ... Plantation slavery also occurred ... Slave relationships in Africa have been transformed through three large-scale processes: the Arab slave trade, the Atlantic slave trade, and the slave emancipation policies and movements in the 19th and 20th centuries ...

Slavery South of the Equator

During the Atlantic slave trade, [Latin America](#) was the main destination of millions of African people transported from Africa to French, Portuguese, and Spanish colonies. Slavery's legacy is the presence of large Afro-Latino populations.

Slavery in Australia

Chattel slavery was never implemented in Australia and slavery was never legally sanctioned. Groups used as [effective slave labour](#) include convicts, Indigenous Australians, coolies from China and India, and Pacific Islanders. Legal protections varied and were sometimes not enforced. This all came as [a surprise](#), apparently, to our PM.

Beyond Emancipation

It would be going too far to say that the [attention given to the U.S.](#) (not just in matters of race relations) is a distortion - but it is always an imbalance. The post-emancipation story, though similar elsewhere, is [varied](#). Should an American house of memory uphold or challenge [exceptionalism](#)?

Slavery today

[Modern slavery](#) is the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain. Modern slavery is all around us, but often just out of sight. People can become entrapped making our clothes, serving our food, picking our crops, working in factories, or working in houses as cooks, cleaners or nannies.

[Mauritania](#) is one of the last countries in the world where people are still born into slavery and literally owned by other people, facing a lifetime of abuse and forced labour.

2020, June 28:

Contextualising civil rights

I am not alone in seeing BLM in a [wider context](#) beyond the borders of the U.S. or that the connections between [BLM and slavery](#) are complicated. But leaving slavery and the rest of the world aside for a moment (as if that is ever possible) how can BLM be fitted into the story of prejudice and persecution within the U.S? I would, even so, want to compare and contrast what goes on there with the experience in the two neighbouring countries – Canada and Mexico.

There is a long history of troubled relations with “minorities” including Asians, Irish, and Jews. Historically, religion provides one dimension of the prejudice. The British settlers fled their homeland not to escape religious persecution but to impose their own. “Others” who are Protestant (e.g. Amish, Hutterites, et al.) are (now) seen as quaint rather than threatening (or maybe just too few to worry about). But Blacks are overwhelmingly Christian, so it can’t only be that.

A race-relations quadrangle exists in the U.S. formed by Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and First Nations. Mathematically, this gives rise to six axes of (possible) prejudice. BLM focuses on Black/White. Each axis represents group relations that differs in many particulars from the others. White/First Nations, for example, is a story of displacement, depopulation, and dispossession whereas White/Black is a story of importation, subordination, and exploitation. Do these differences mean that we can understand each only in its own terms and separately from the others or must we also look at them together in order to understand each of them properly as expressions of larger themes beyond the particularity? These stories focus on oppression by Whites (displacement, subordination) and what has been and is being done by one group to another but that may be an unbalanced way of understanding relations between them.

Unsurprisingly, I think that institutions with gatekeeping power (as Mr Leonardo calls us) should reach their own conclusions and not simply subscribe to the views of their BIPOC audience - which is not what I understand him to be saying by the way (and I agree with him that we must contend with the power that we hold). And I am not so naïve as to suppose that we can “contend” by simply lecturing others about curatorial integrity. My conclusions, inter alia, are that Black/White racism in the U.S. cannot be properly understood removed from its broader context and that context includes tension along all six axes – including (notably) [Black/Hispanic relations](#). Police violence against Blacks is of a piece with [violence against Hispanics](#) and the two can be understood as part of the same prejudice rather than simply as two different and unrelated things.

The custodial challenge is (predictably) becoming more urgent and the focus is (equally predictably) turning our way. We are being asked to “confront current issues and topics that aren't neutral”. When I speak of custodial agnosticism, I do not mean indifference (much less neutrality) towards what Verne Harris has referred to as the [call for justice](#). What I am concerned about is the integrity of the record and (yes) objectivity in the ways we think about it. I long ago argued that we cannot detach ourselves from our own social context and I hold to that. The challenge lies in figuring out **how** to relate and (if we are to maintain our own values intact) not simply to succumb.

2020, July 19: Critical theory

I've just come across a [new term](#) (for me) that I suspect we'll hear more about in the culture wars. Full disclosure: I came across it in a [Guardian article](#) about a journalist who has (he says) been pressured into resigning from the *New York Magazine* -

Sullivan, former editor of *The New Republic* and writer on [Time](#), [The Atlantic](#), [The Daily Beast](#), said in a post that colleagues at the Pulitzer-winning publication "seem to believe ... that any writer not actively committed to [critical theory](#) in questions of race, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity is actively, physically harming co-workers merely by existing in the same virtual space."

In some ways it would be nice to think of Recordkeeping as a critical theory (in the high-minded, philosophical sense) confronting power structures with the obstacles of Truth and Evidence, but we can't come together on anything coherently enough to dignify it in that way. Maybe that's a good thing if we avoid the wowsersism deriving from theorisation of a baser kind called out in the [letter on justice and open debate](#). Just to clarify, before the list blossoms, it's the wowsersism, not the theory/ies on which it is/are based, that is at fault.

2020, July 20: <<[Michael Piggott](#):...As to whether it would be nice to think of recordkeeping as a critical theory confronting power structures, recordkeeping as practiced and recordkeepers as practitioners rarely confront them, but rather it/they facilitate/s them. Still, one trend within our scholarship does seem to be embracing an agenda towards diversity and social justice – and who would be against that? ... Hence for example the [Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies](#), founded in 2017 to take on "paradigms" and to publish research on areas "that might otherwise be marginalized from dominant discourses". Its issue no 2 was a theme issue on "Critical Archival Studies", and included an article on "Critical Archiving and Recordkeeping Theory Research and Practice in the Continuum" which questioned "the social constructs, values and power differentials embedded in current frameworks, processes, systems and technologies"...I've been in two minds about this trend. In the *New Discourse* commentary [Chris referenced](#), it noted that sometimes confusion about the term Critical Theory "is expressed disingenuously by academics who dislike criticism of critical theories". Indeed, the tag "critical" can be used cynically to prosecute more than one agenda, as it was to spruik a conference badged as [Critical Archives in Melbourne in November 2017](#)... >> Thank you. Michael. I thought I was joking when I wrote about Recordkeeping as critical theory but you have demonstrated that critical archiving theory (in the proper sense) is a real thing and has been for some time. Shame on me for not knowing that.

2020, August 16: It is said that Thomas Huxley (Darwin's bulldog) [reacted to the Theory of Evolution](#) by saying "How extremely stupid not to have thought of that." I had a similar response to [The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies and the Fate of Liberty](#) by Daron Acemoglu & James A Robinson. The thesis is almost banal. There is an unending tension, never to be resolved (the Red Queen Effect), between the State and Society which exist, in relation to each other, as disorganisation and chaos (the Absent Leviathan), authoritarianism (the Despotic Leviathan), and an unstable balance (the Shackled Leviathan)

- A disparity of wealth and power ultimately results in an uprising of popular revolt actually (or ostensibly) aimed at a redistribution – examples ranging from Gracchus to Lenin.
- An imbalance towards Society (the Shackled Leviathan) leads to chaos and disorder.
- An imbalance towards the State (the Despotic Leviathan) even when it springs from the mob turning towards a populist for salvation, leads to loss of liberty.

My take: economic discontent need not be the only driver of chaos, it can also be found in the pursuit of "virtue" (cf. Robespierre), a twist these authors may not have considered. These ideas are illustrated in a breath-taking review of history (mostly European). Published in 2019, it is the first account (albeit an elitist one) I have found believable of the Trump phenomenon –

As Machiavelli foresaw, if desperate, the common people ... give up their support to one man so as to be defended by his authority" ... The history of the Italian communes shows us that there is nothing automatic about moving back into the corridor ... A population failing to benefit from economic changes, feeling that the elites are getting the upper hand, and losing its trust in institutions. A struggle between different parties becoming increasingly polarized and zero-sum. Institutional failing to resolve and mediate conflicts. An economic crisis further destabilizing institutions and eviscerating trust in them. A strongman claiming to

stand for the people against the elites, and asking for the institutional checks to be relaxed so that he can serve the people better. Sound familiar? (Viking, 2019, pp. 423-425).

Do we have a critical theory to deal with this oscillation? Should recordkeeping values lead us mobilise and choose – to take sides in the struggle - or to stand aloof. Would curatorial agnosticism (towards which my thinking would tend) constitute an even more critical, more daring, theory – aligning with a never-to-be-stable-for-long balance (not a neutrality) between struggling forces who upset the Red Queen Effect, who create and destroy records, and who use and misuse them? Neutrality would make us irrelevant but a critical theory of our own that did not involve "active commitment" (possibly in violation of the definition) might be a basis for explaining ourselves to ourselves, if not to the satisfaction of contending parties.

PS. The [Red Queen Effect](#) is taken from the *Alice in Wonderland* episode in which Alice races against the Red Queen but both stay where they are (in relation to each other and the world) – a kind of relativism, I suppose.

PPS. Is it possible to take an objective view of social phenomena without oneself being an elitist?

2020, August 17: <<the tag "critical" can be used cynically to prosecute more than one agenda>> That's the problem with any unifying theory of everything. As Sir Humphrey Appleby once remarked, "The Sermon on the Mount could never be approved as a Statement of Government Policy – a most unsound document."

<< Marx's crack at philosophers for wanting to interpret the world when they should have been seeking to change it>> It's hard to summarise a 500-page book in a short listserv posting but, while I think the authors are primarily about establishing a framework for interpreting the world, I don't think they're saying we shouldn't try to change it. They clearly prefer the Shackled Leviathan because that's the one that affords the best chance of both safety and freedom and I agree with them about that. But it is not a natural state. If we fall outside the "Corridor" there is no guarantee we'll just snap back when chaos or despotism fail. It takes effort. In order to achieve it, and even more importantly to maintain it, you can't rely on things just righting themselves or staying as they are. The good news is that the same is true of chaos and despotism. Standing still and hoping things will come good (interpretation without action) is not the way to maintain anything. You have to run like hell (the Red Queen Effect). It's a bit like (but not quite the same as) Lampedusa's formulation in *The Leopard*: "things will have to change if they are to stay the same".

We are seeing nations that were once described as having reached the end of history – liberal, safe, democratic, dedicated to the rule of law, and free – falling back to become Despotic Leviathans (Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Philippines, Pakistan, and any number of countries in Asia, South America, and the Middle East). Some of them never got there in the first place (e.g. China). And the U.S.? Maintaining or restoring a Shackled Leviathan means contending all the time with forces that could at any moment tip it outside the boundary of the Narrow Corridor. Paradoxically, that contention is also the mechanism by which it survives.

I'm comfortable with that paradox because it parallels my own confusions. I have argued in favour of [activism](#) and for the role of archivists in [upholding democratic systems](#). But, because they may threaten our professional values, I am also wary of commitments to the forces of change (political and/or social, cultural even as witness what is happening with AWM and SRONSW) - commitments to something else that can get in the way of doing our job, not the forces as such. I find the formulation in this book, emphasizing the hardship involved when dealing with contending forces, a good one but it's difficult to put into words that enthusiasts will understand. I like the way A J P Taylor once described the role of the historian –

[t]he historian does well to lead a dedicated life; yet however dedicated, he remains primarily a citizen. To turn from political responsibility to dedication therefore is to open the door to tyranny and measureless barbarism. (*Englishmen and Others*)

2020, 9 August: What a difference ... (5) Critical theory and cultural competence

Educators from around the [US] have been [reflecting on what they teach and how they teach it](#) in the wake of the death of George Floyd and the national protests that followed. Some lessons up for reconsideration: the dismissive take that it was simply "the norm" that Presidents George Washington and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves in the late 1700s and language around Christopher Columbus' "discovery" of America ... Additions to history classes might include lessons on intersectional figures, such as Bayard Rustin, the Black man who organized the 1963 March on Washington but was largely shunned in the civil rights movement because he was gay ...

Adina Goldstein, a seventh-grade social studies and English teacher in Philadelphia, said she had been thinking about how to turn her social studies class into more of an ethnic studies course to reflect more African American and Latin American history. That would, in turn, reflect the identities of the majority of her students. Goldstein, who is Chinese American and Jewish, said she recently spoke with a former African American history teacher, who said "something really insightful to me: 'We teach what we know.'"

Anton Schulzki, a high school teacher in Colorado Springs, Colorado, said the state recently held a virtual conference at which dozens of social studies teachers discussed changing their approaches to their curricula to move beyond their own biases ... "There's a decided push for us to really begin to re-examine our own biases and how we approach things in our classroom. There's a push among a lot of teachers, period, across the country to really examine how we approach things," said Schulzki, who is president-elect of the National Council for the Social Studies

2020, September 25: Now, here's a word (two words actually) that might make a difference – "culturally competent". It is a term used in health and welfare and it means, according to [one source](#) –

- open attitude (being prepared to expose yourself to diverse ideas and alternative viewpoints)
- self-awareness (turning a flashlight onto your own culture, beliefs, values, and background in order to more objectively explore what you may subconsciously be bringing to every interpersonal interaction),
- awareness of others (recognizing that all individuals are uniquely programmed with their own background, worldview, beliefs and values, and that while these may not match up with your own, they are equally valid and valuable)
- cultural knowledge (acquiring information about others' values, norms, and beliefs, an information base from which you can engage in your own conversations and inquiries)
- cultural skills (asking more informed questions, adapting your communication style to different individuals, groups, and cultures, using active listening skills, establishing relationships based on mutual trust, clearly identifying areas of conflict or concern and recognizing their impact, making clear requests of others, implementing processes that promote organizational cultural competence and inclusion).

These are interpretations from a guidebook on medical practice, but the term is used [more broadly](#) and at one level it could serve in meeting our cultural challenge in areas like reference and access, selection and display, and description.

Knowledge (of oneself and the situation) is always to be valued. But (there's often a but, isn't there) some of this is tosh, viz. "other beliefs and values ... are equally valid and valuable". Must I accept Donald Trump's beliefs and values as equally valid and valuable as my own? This is the kind of cultural relativism that portrays the death and terror inflicted by Vikings and Mongols in terms of moral equivalence. Conversely, there is moral relativism too in failing to acknowledge the horrors of colonialism or the crimes of Governments today (U.S. in Iraq and Australia in East Timor). Adjusting Australian history to take account of the Aboriginal experience is not about subscribing to an alternative worldview (though it may be prompted by that). It is about abjuring relativism and correcting error. I am still surprised when those deploring bias upbraid objectivity, as if there is any other basis for detecting it.

The underlying theme seems to be that cultural competence supports sympathetic and positive inter-personal dealings based on acceptance of differences. That is not dissimilar to what underlies the challenge to us as curators and guardians of memory to engage with difference. But our role goes beyond inter-personal dealings, does it not? We also deal in objectivity and truth (not just objectivity in dealing with our own subconscious but also in dealing with reality outside ourselves). And this objectivity sometimes leads us to disagreeable conclusions and to inconvenient truths. In our search for those inconvenient truths, it is sometimes necessary to reject the idea that all views and values are “equally valid and valuable”.

2020, December 4: “New Museum”

<<[Joanna Sassoon](#): A small [article](#) from the [Townsville Daily bulletin](#) ... [New WA museum removes reference to COVID-19 ‘originating in China’ after complaint. It seems that scientific rigour has been lost in the immediate haste to include contemporary information in exhibits by venerable scientific institutions museum exhibitions information.](#) >>

2020, December 5: More on [museum wars](#)

The state museum of [Western Australia](#) has changed a display that stated mainland China was the “origin” of the coronavirus and included Taiwan in a map of China, after a complaint from the WA Chinese consul general. The WA Museum Boola Bardip said the exhibit was changed for “factual” reasons, not political pressure, because the World Health Organization has not yet determined where the virus technically originated. The museum also changed a world map in the exhibit to include Taiwan when [China](#) was selected – claiming that it reflected “Australian government policy”. But Mark Harrison, a senior lecturer in Chinese studies at the University of Tasmania, said this was “not correct” and the museum had overstepped Australia’s own foreign policy on Taiwan. The change came after the museum received a letter of complaint from the WA Chinese consul general, Dong Zhi Hua ...

A spokeswoman for the WA Museum said there was no coercion from the consulate and it was a factual correction ... A museum spokeswoman added: “Whatever people’s personal views may be about international politics, as a museum we deal in facts.” ... Researcher Sophie McNeill from Human Rights Watch Australia said the shift “fits a pattern” of political pressure from the Chinese government on museums and other institutions. “We saw this in France, where two months ago Chinese officials tried to change and rewrite elements of an exhibition on Mongolian history and to blacklist certain words,” she told Guardian Australia ...

Let others squabble over how to describe “China” and “Taiwan”. My question is this: what kind of museum/gallery looks to find Truth in “Australian government policy”? Joseph Goebbels could ask no more from a director or curator.

<<[Andrew Waugh](#): [To be fair, they weren’t looking for truth. They were looking for a plausible excuse.](#)>>

2020, December 6: Joanna laments the loss of scientific rigour “in the immediate haste to include contemporary information in ... exhibitions ...” The next house of memory contemplating such immediate haste will likely think twice about upsetting China and how indeed to avoid upsetting anyone in a position to raise a powerful voice in opposition. That’s how intimidation moves from punishing unwelcome views that are expressed (shouting them down, megaphone politics, dismissal, hate speech laws) to prior restraint intended to prevent dissent from being expressed in the first place (de-platforming, intimidation, correctness, not offending those who say they’re offended).

For some of our institutions (and I may be over-generous with “some”) not being put to the trouble of “looking for a plausible excuse.” will be their way of engaging with social and political dilemmas. It’s called a [Heckler’s Veto](#)

... restrictions on speech because of the anticipated or actual reactions of opponents ... also used in general conversation to refer to any incident in which opponents block speech by direct action or by “shouting down” a speaker through protest.

As we have seen, hecklers won’t limit themselves to “contemporary information” unless you extend that concept to include any topic from any time that offends people now (e.g. slavery, religion, race, identity, etc.), So, a house of memory must decide how to deal with the Heckler’s Veto as it navigates the entire

range of social and political agendas in contemporary life, not just with information about contemporary events. Verily, [the past is prologue](#).

2020, December 7: <<[Michael Piggott](#): ... aren't the conceptual categories pretty settled? Fact, evidence, meaning, interpretation, etc? One of the best recent articulations of the categories and their contemporary importance is Laura Millar's *A Matter of Facts. The Value of Evidence in an Information Age ...* Not unrelated, reviews continue to appear of the two competing "Palace Letters" books, Jenny Hocking's *The Palace Letters* (Scribe, 2020) and Paul Kelly and Troy Bramston's *The Truth of the Palace Letters* (Melbourne University Press, 2020) ... what could be more relevant to our professional concerns than these two books and the legal and NAA dramas which preceded the letters' release? ... A/Prof Paul Strangio's comparative review in [last weekend's SMH](#) ... demonstrates how the agreed facts of the letters have given rise to sharply different interpretations ("guilty" party was the Palace *versus* "guilty" parties were Whitlam + Fraser + Kerr). In *The Spectator* of 21 November 2020 David Pearl lumps for just Fraser and Whitlam ("Dismiss dismissal dogma"). Others reckon Prince Charles and Sir David Smith need to be cited too. Oh dear. What to think? So imagine the NAA mounting a major exhibition of the letters and their meaning, stressing the archival aspects seeing it is the national archives. It was and is deeply implicated in the whole saga, as we know and as Strangio and Hocking explain. It would be a fascinating exhibition ... >>

2020, December 9: On a light-hearted note, I would draw your attention to the "fact" that they have just changed the height of Mt Everest. It's all a bit like one of those irregular verbs Bernard Wooley is so fond of:

- I am impartial
- You are politically incorrect
- He has been charged under the hate speech provisions of the Anti-Discrimination Act

Of course, the mountain hasn't actually changed at all but our understanding of it has (if you accept the recalibration) and if you don't (I suppose) Donald Trump will be President of the USA after Jan.20.- a depressingly post-modernist conclusion that what is true is that which we accept as true.

2021, January 20: Pigeon in Peril

Have you been following the story of [Joe-the-Racing-Pigeon](#) whose life AQIS wants to take?

... after apparently flying 13,000 kilometres across the Pacific Ocean from the US ... [the] pigeon turned up in Kevin Celli-Bird's backyard in outer-suburban Melbourne on Boxing Day, exhausted and weak ... Joe's feat ... attracted the attention of the notoriously strict Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service, who [were] worried about bird diseases he might be carrying ... The Agriculture Department, which is responsible for biosecurity, said the pigeon was "not permitted to remain in Australia" because it "could compromise Australia's food security and our wild bird populations." "It poses a direct biosecurity risk to Australian bird life and our poultry industry," a department statement said ... Victorian Health Minister Martin Foley urged AQIS to "show some compassion" while Acting Prime Minister Michael McCormack [said] "If Joe has come in a way that has not met our strict biosecurity measures, then bad luck Joe," ... "Either fly home or face the consequences." Australian National Pigeon Association secretary Brad Turner said there were genuine fears pigeons from the US could carry exotic diseases and he agreed Joe should be destroyed ...

What I can't understand is this. I thought that we got tens of thousands of unannounced visits annually from migratory birds from abroad. Don't they also pose a threat to biosecurity? If so, why was Joe singled out? Is he more a victim of too much publicity rather than over-zealous border control? But, believe it or not, there's a recordkeeping dimension to this curious tale.

[Experts initially traced it to one that disappeared from a race in the US state of Oregon](#) on October 29. They thought the pigeon...had hitched a ride on a cargo ship.. the Oklahoma-based American Racing Pigeon Union had confirmed that Joe was registered to an owner in Montgomery, Alabama [but] On Friday afternoon, the American group said it had determined the blue band on Joe's leg – used to initially identify him – was a fake..."The pigeon found in Australia sports a counterfeit band and need not be destroyed..." the little-known Pigeon Rescue Melbourne said...it believed he was wearing a "knock-off American ring that anyone could buy". "We believe he is not an American pigeon at all – rather an Australian pigeon," it said.

The original identification of Joe as American (based on a leg band now said to be counterfeit) was used to link him to an owner in Alabama. How could the records kept by ARPU get the identification so wrong? Wouldn't there have to be markings on the counterfeit blue band that matched the registered details of the Alabama owner. Or what????

PS I'm beginning to wonder if the story of Joe is a hoax. Having a pigeon fancier named Celli-Bird seems too good to be true. And can officialdom and all those eminent people really be taking positions on this? It is the silly season, after all.

2021, January 21: A pigeon's lament:

The life so short, the art so long to learn, the attempt so hard, the conquest so sharp, the fearful joy that ever slips away so quickly - by all this I mean love, which so sorely astounds my feeling with its wondrous operation, that when I think upon it I scarce know whether I wake or sleep. Parlement of Foules

[Chaucer axed](#) – what next?

The University of Leicester will stop teaching [Geoffrey Chaucer](#) in favour of modules on race and sexuality, according to new proposals ... courses on canonical works will be dropped for modules that "students expect" as part of plans now under consultation. Foundational texts like *The Canterbury Tales* and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* would no longer be taught under proposals to scrap medieval literature. Instead, the English faculty will ... deliver a "decolonised" curriculum devoted to diversity ... New modules described as "excitingly innovative" would cover: "A chronological literary history, a selection of modules on race, ethnicity, sexuality and diversity, a decolonised curriculum, and new employability modules."

Professors were told that, to facilitate change, management planned to stop all English language courses, cease medieval literature, and reduce early modern literature offerings ... They would end all teaching on texts central to the development of the English language, including the Dark Age epic poem *Beowulf*, as well as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, the Viking sagas, and all works written earlier than 1500 would also be removed from the syllabus. Cuts to early modern English modules could see texts like John Milton's *Paradise Lost* omitted, according to concerned academics, with teaching on Christopher Marlowe and John Donne potentially reduced.

The University of Leicester has said that teaching on William Shakespeare's work will remain in place. <<[Andrew Waugh](#): ... This story would appear to push all their buttons, which means I'd like more details before I hit the outrage alarm ... it could be as minor as replacing an optional unit on medieval english literature with new units examining authors and literature outside the traditional canon ... >> Are you saying, Andrew, that we shouldn't be outraged so long as Chaucer has already been relegated to an option but that we can be outraged if he is lost to the core curriculum? I can't see that cancelling a Chaucer option is materially different from cancelling him from the mainstream. I suspect that medieval studies will go the way of the classics but my reaction will be sorrow rather than outrage.

You're quite correct that this story has yet to mature. It is based on a communication last Monday from the VC of this "cash-strapped university" to staff announcing cuts and retrenchments. I'm as skeptical as the next guy, but the *Telegraph* article I cited (which I found repeated on [The World News](#) site) uses direct quotes from the administration, e.g.

"A chronological literary history, a selection of modules on race, ethnicity, sexuality and diversity, a decolonised curriculum, and new employability modules."

alongside expressions of concern from academics facing redundancy. We're in a bad way if a mainstream media outlet is doubted to the extent that we can believe they falsify what the administration is actually quoted as saying.

Apart from an economic imperative (cash strapped), the quotes from the University point towards two motivating factors: ideological ("decolonization") and commercial ("new employability modules"). No doubt *Telegraph* readers believe that an entire generation has been corrupted by culture wars polluting

the education system and that the products of that system now demand non-traditional study as a matter of course (no pun intended). They would see no difference between those two motives.

Some of the academics' concerns expressed to the *Telegraph*, whose buttons I have no doubt they well know how to push, are of the *worst possible scenario* kind. And the article makes clear that no decisions have yet been made. There would, however, be a certain irony if liberal arts academics lost their jobs because the "traditional canon" they teach goes out of fashion. Many of them have been at the forefront of [dislodging and devaluing](#) that canon for decades.

2021, January 24: <<[Andrew Waugh](#): ... The Tele's position is clear: English literature is the study of English (geographical area) literature, and particularly the canon, not english (language grouping) literature in all its complexity.>> Well, we've come a long way from Joe the Pigeon, haven't we? By this I suppose you to mean that the canon comprises the work of dead white males (or some such nonsense) whereas language grouping means something more complex and more diverse. We've spoken on this List before about false dichotomies. I'll chance my arm and say that I think this is one. The dichotomy ignores the location within the canon of Austen, Eliot, the Brontes, Murdoch, and the Irish, Scottish, American, and Welsh writers - to say nothing of those writing in English from Australia, India, Canada, and New Zealand.

<<... if medieval english literature is attracting three students every year, I could appreciate why the department might want to change its course offerings to something that is more popular.>> You don't have to be a *Tele* reader to understand that [student demand](#) has very little to do with curriculum development and pedagogical method which are far more likely to be [imposed imperially on students](#) than to be chosen by them (always have been, back to Plato). There is a respectable argument that what has been taught up to now and how it has been taught have reflected a cultural dominance that should be challenged on the basis of a respect for diversity (even, some would argue, at the expense of quality). An equally respectable case can be made that the curriculum hasn't kept pace with intellectual developments that make earlier "views" obsolescent. Not that I subscribe to either of those positions, of course. Ever since I was a student teacher, I've been of the view that the curriculum should concentrate on how to think not on what to think – on [how to learn](#) rather than on what to know. But parents and ideologues wouldn't have that. Far more sinister, in our time, has been the purposeful attempt to [recruit curricula to serve an overt ideological purpose](#). This latter consideration has become a core element in the battle over culture wars and to represent the word "decolonization", for example, an avowed purpose of this change, even when quoted out of context, as merely a harmless recognition of student choice is simply naive.

[Critical pedagogy](#) is a philosophy of education and social movement that developed and applied concepts from [critical theory](#) and related traditions to the field of education and the study of culture. It insists that issues of [social justice](#) and [democracy](#) are not distinct from acts of teaching and learning. The goal of critical pedagogy is emancipation from oppression through an awakening of the [critical consciousness](#), based on the Portuguese term [conscientização](#). When achieved, critical consciousness encourages individuals to effect change in their world through [social critique](#) and [political action](#) in order to [self-actualize](#).

Critical pedagogy was founded by the Brazilian philosopher and educator [Paulo Freire](#), who promoted it through his 1968 book, [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#). It subsequently spread internationally, developing a particularly strong base in the United States, where proponents sought to develop means of using teaching to combat racism, sexism, and oppression. As it grew, it incorporated elements from fields like the Human rights movement, Civil rights movement, Disability rights movement, Indigenous rights movement, postmodern theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and queer theory. Critics have argued that it is not appropriate for institutions of higher education to explicitly promote radical political activism among their students. They have suggested that adherents of critical pedagogy have focused on promoting political perspectives in the classroom at the expense of teaching pupils other skills, such as a proficiency in writing.

If *Tele* readers had heard of critical pedagogy, I guess they'd be against it.

2021, January 25: To every action there is [an equal and opposite reaction](#).

... Last summer, when the [statue of Edward Colston](#) was toppled by Black Lives Matter protesters in Bristol, there were two clear lessons that could be drawn ... that Britain was a country that urgently needed to

confront the chapters of its history that for centuries have been brushed under the carpet ... [and] that those same histories could be weaponised for political gain ... with so much going wrong and the need for political distraction so acute, the housing minister was sent out to bat, his task to desperately try to kickstart the statue wars of last summer by promising a new law to protect them.

Yet this is not really about statues and never has been. It is not even about history, as the concept of history the government claims to defend is one that most historians would struggle to recognise. What ministers and, more significantly, the government's campaign strategists are seeking to evoke and champion is something called "Our History", the sole and sacred property of "The People" ... another group of culture warriors in Washington was fighting an offensive of its own, or at least it was until 12.01pm on Wednesday ... among the projects cancelled [by Biden] ... was the [1776 Commission](#) ... Trump's response to the *New York Times's* [1619 Project](#), which attempted to place slavery at the centre of the story of America's founding. The [1776 Commission's report](#) had been hastily written and was rushed to press on Monday ... According to the report, the cause of racial division in America was not two and a half centuries of slavery, a century of Jim Crow and lynching, or even systemic racism and racial disadvantage, but the teaching of the histories of slavery, segregation and racism in schools and colleges ...

Like men with a guilty conscience, those promoting these history wars accuse others of the crime they are committing, because it is not historians but politicians who are fomenting divisions ... many historians, myself very much included, have too often been too slow in recognising the strategising behind this. Blinded by our emotional connection to the past and our professional commitment to evidence, we have failed to see the big picture ... Such attacks ... are effective, in part, because they play on pre-existing presumptions. The politicians involved understand two things. To those accustomed to privilege, equality can feel like oppression. And to nations accustomed to hearing only comforting myths of exceptionalism, simple, irrefutable historical fact can sound like slander. Enough now, surely, of the comforting myths.

"... it is not historians but politicians who are fomenting divisions ..."

Really? How gratifying to be the servant of truth and evidence and to have no pre-existing assumptions of one's own. How comforting to be able to denigrate those who dissent from you as privileged and deluded by myths and to be able to deride them with "irrefutable historical fact". How good it is to have a conspiracy theory that relieves you of the obligation to think about what your opponents are saying or why they feel impelled to say it. How arrogant to assume that the history of slavery has for centuries "been brushed under the carpet" until historians like this one saw the light. How tragic that historians with a more nuanced view now have no choice but to denounce the bombast and simplistic nonsense of the reaction. I am as devoted to historical facts as anyone but I don't think they are irrefutable and I think that marshalling them for the avowed purpose of discomforting the comfortable is a short road into error. BLM clearly represents yet another version of "Our History". Chronology remains an important part of history, but this historian seems to forget that his "irrefutable facts", his supposed pulling aside of the carpet, began the history wars. Let us hope Hegel was right and that out of this mess a Synthesis will emerge (never forgetting that it won't be unassailable either).

2021, February 19: Old, damaged or untruthful

[Eye of the beholder](#)

A Tennessee librarian has lost his job after allegedly burning copies of books by [Donald Trump](#) and rightwing commentator Ann Coulter. The Chattanooga public library dismissed Cameron Dequintez Williams after he allegedly posted videos of himself in his backyard in December pouring lighter fluid over Coulter's [How to Talk to Liberals \(If You Must\)](#) and Trump's [Crippled America](#) ... Williams, a Black Lives Matter protester, said he has been unfairly treated, and that he was simply following a library instruction to remove any "old, damaged or untruthful books". The library does have a "weeding" policy for the removal of certain books from circulation. But it says Trump and Coulter's books do not meet that criteria ... The library said last year that Williams' alleged behavior constituted censorship and had no place in a library ...

Imagine a world from which all of Trump's thoughts had been expurgated (including the tweets). People would come to wonder what all the fuss was about. De-platforming him before ever he opened his mouth would have been much more effective, of course. What a pity we can't stop history before it happens.

On the other hand, here is another librarian sacked for wanting to be apolitical ...

... In July, Arizona librarian Ron Kelley received an email from the American Library Association—the largest librarian association in the world—soliciting individuals to join the Black Lives Matter movement. Kelley ... replied to the list-serve with an email titled "Keep Politics Off This Discussion Group," in which he argued that libraries should remain neutral and apolitical. Following two complaints to the Flagstaff Library regarding his email, Kelley was fired from his job. Prior to Kelley's removal, the American Library Association released material instructing employees to embrace "critical librarianship," which asks libraries and librarians to analyze how they "consciously and unconsciously support systems of oppression." Its core tenet is that neutrality harms oppressed groups. As one Portland librarian [put it](#) in the *American Libraries* magazine, remaining neutral as a librarian "upholds inequality and represents indifference to the marginalization of members of our community." Kelley told the *Washington Free Beacon* that this idea was wrongheaded...

The *Washington Free Beacon* appears to be an [ultra-conservative ginger group](#) of dubious repute but "critical librarianship" seems to be real enough –

Over the past few years, critical librarianship has become a force that pervades every area of our work ... which raises the question of whether that work reflects the neutrality that has long been a value in our profession. One tenet of critical librarianship is that neutrality is not only unachievable, it is harmful to oppressed groups in our society ... *American Libraries* (2017)

Those who can recall the [Imperilled Pigeon thread](#) from earlier this year may recognise the similarities between this nonsense and [critical pedagogy](#). How long, I wonder, before there are calls for "critical archiving"?

2021, February 20: <<[Michael Piggott: Re critical archiving \(and critical theory more generally\), there were relevant exchanges on this list in July 2020, including this \(extract\) from something I posted at that time:](#)

... the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, founded in 2017 to take on "prevailing paradigms" and to publish research on areas "that might otherwise be marginalized from dominant discourses". Its issue no 2 was a theme issue on "Critical Archival Studies", and included an article on "Critical Archiving and Recordkeeping Theory Research and Practice in the Continuum" which questioned "the social constructs, values and power differentials embedded in current frameworks, processes, systems and technologies". Apparently "Critical Museum Theory" is a thing too, and even "critical informatics"! It seems as well as Keynesians, we are all Criticals now. Regardless, I've been in two minds about this trend. In the New Discourse commentary [Chris referenced](#), it noted that sometimes confusion about the term Critical Theory "is expressed disingenuously by academics who dislike criticism of critical theories". Indeed, the tag "critical" can be used cynically to prosecute more than one agenda, as it was to spruik a conference badged as *Critical Archives* in Melbourne in November 2017.>>

It can be argued that there is a connection between [cancel culture](#), [postmodernism](#), and [critical theory](#). During the 1930's, the Frankfurt School established 'Critical Theory' which ... hones in on the imperfect aspects of a society, using them to call into question and even discredit the beneficial and self-correcting parts of a culture. Over the course of the next sixty years, other intellectuals and scholars further explored these ideas, focusing on *cultural* oppression, rather than economic, under the disparate branches of cultural studies, post-colonialism, critical pedagogy, feminism, black feminism, postmodernism, queer theory, critical race theory, and others ...

Critical theory provides insightful tools for social self-examination, our motives, and our treatment of people from all walks of life. It draws attention to real pain and suffering that may be otherwise overlooked or swept under the cultural rug [and] reveals how injustice can be codified into law [but] focuses on liberating the oppressed to the exclusion of all else. There is no mention of character, humility, frugality, honesty, work ethic, kindness, charity, temperance, or overcoming any of the myriad of negative traits that are a fact of human nature. Critical theory lets its adherents off the hook of personal development and personal responsibility. In fact, it characterizes these virtues as tools of western hegemony. One's only duty is to insist that *others* change

Critical theory claims to defy intolerance but changes the definition of the word to mean that anyone voicing an opposing opinion are the intolerant ones. Everyone must be tolerant of critical theory voices, but its adherents are intolerant of outside voices, particularly those in an oppressor group whose speech is deemed a form of violence, called "microaggressions." [It] is absolutist and profoundly ungrateful. We see this in its adherents' rejection of historical figures like Christopher Columbus or the U.S. founding fathers

... historical figures are viewed through a contemporary lens ... Truth claims are "dismiss[ed] as false because of the assumed motives of the person making the claim ... bypass[ing] the question of whether the claim is true and focuses the discussion on the claimant's group identity." Operating under the belief that "truth claims are really veiled bids for power" adherents of critical theory, rather than examining the validity of the claim on its merits ask, "what incentives does this person have to make this claim? What social or political agenda motivates this statement? How does this statement function to preserve his power or privilege?" (Shenvi, 2020).

Critical theory requires adversarial relationships at the outset, breeds resentment and victimhood ... Individuals are known not for their own behavior but by their place in the intersectional victim hierarchy or oppressed class. You are judged not by the content of your character, but by your skin color, your gender, your sexual orientation, your economic class, and the sins of past peoples who looked like you

And, as [Douglas Murray](#) has astutely pointed out, there is no forgiveness (however old the sin may be). Repentance is demanded but it does no good, you remain condemned all the same – not for what you did but for who you are. The implications for us, struggling to identify and sustain historical truth, are profound.

2021, February 23: In the US, federal agencies are now a [battle ground](#) for critical theory. So far, it seems to be only about "trainings". What a word! What happens if (when?) it spills over into an examination of the ways federal agencies (such as NARA) communicate "facts" to the public (contextualise the records in their care). But, no doubt those agencies have already been minding their Ps and Qs for some time now.

A staffer at Smith College has resigned, publishing a letter accusing the elite women's university of creating a "racially hostile environment" against white people ... Shaw said the culture had changed forcefully after a 2018 incident when a black student accused a white staffer of racism for calling campus security on her. An investigation showed no evidence of racial bias, but the college put in place a list of initiatives aimed at fighting "systemic racism" on campus. Yet the ideology driving the efforts seemed more concerned with inflaming anti-white sentiment rather than mitigating any form of racism, based on Shaw's account.

"I endured racially hostile comments, and was expected to participate in racially prejudicial behavior as a continued condition of my employment. I endured meetings in which another staff member violently banged his fist on the table, chanting 'Rich, white women! Rich, white women!' in reference to Smith alumnae. I listened to my supervisor openly name preferred racial quotas for job openings in our department. I was given supplemental literature in which the world's population was reduced to two categories—'dominant group members' and 'subordinated group members'—based solely on characteristics like race," Shaw's letter says ... She said other staffers she spoke to were "deeply troubled" by the developments but were "too terrified to speak out about it."

In January 2020, Shaw said, she attended a mandatory staff retreat "focused on racial issues." ... "Later, the facilitators told everyone present that a white person's discomfort at discussing their race is a symptom of 'white fragility.' They said that the white person may seem like they are in distress but that it is actually a 'power play,'" she wrote ...

She filed a workplace complaint, but felt it wasn't taken seriously enough on account of her race. "I was told that the civil rights law protections were not created to help people like me," she wrote ... She blamed the change in environment on [critical race theory](#), a quasi-Marxist ideology that reinterprets history as a struggle between whites and other races, labelling people as "oppressors" and "oppressed" on account of their skin color, echoing Marxism's division of society based on class ... Former President Donald Trump dealt a significant blow to the ideology's spread last year when he banned trainings based on the ideology from the federal government, and even federal contractors and some grantees. President Joe Biden, however, reversed the order shortly after taking office ...

From the [Canadian List](#)

... Our Archives is currently completing a project called Movie Monday, highlighting archival films from our collections with a series of YouTube videos and educational blog posts. Several films identified for inclusion in the project contain historic parade footage; some of these include depictions of Indigenous people that would now be considered outdated or offensive. Members of our Indigenous History Committee have reviewed the films and determined that the best course of action is to provide a special-topic blog post

addressing the presence of racist depictions in this parade film footage along with an educational boilerplate contextualizing the material in future posts that reference the films ...

How to strike a balance, when recontextualising, between the actual and the perceived, between what is and what is “considered”? In other words, what is it that drives our pursuit of context – our own best judgement or the sensibilities of our audience, a desire to comprehend or a desire to please? Should Truth be comfortable or inconvenient? When is it OK to be offensive? If we defer to contemporary views on what is “outdated or offensive” is there any space left to us for judgement? Does internalising society’s views about all this, assuming those views to be homogenous and held universally (which is never the case), make us respectful or turn us into culture warriors? No doubt such musings would be seen as a veiled power play.

2021, February 24: ... [respecting the fact that different perspectives exist](#) ...

The president of a [Catholic](#) civil rights organization on Feb. 22 released a scathing rebuke of the so-called Equality Act introduced by Democrats, saying it promotes “the most comprehensive assault on Christianity ever written into law.” ... He said that although the act claims to be about “ending discrimination,” noting that it may indeed be the intention, the repercussions would effectively secularize religious entities and force adherents to violate religious codes of conduct ...

The arguments given in support of this claim are fairly thin and unconvincing. But that’s not the point. Houses of memory aren’t likely to fall foul of such laws any time soon – but we live in strange and disturbing times, so who knows? What the story tells us about, however, is the substance and contours of the ideological debate that is now raging. A debate within which, as we have seen, we must operate and do our work.

I can understand the argument that correctives are needed to combat the blindness, injustices and prejudices of a prevailing orthodoxy (though I blanch a little at the idea that the flowering of liberal, Enlightenment thought is an orthodoxy). But the tenets of enlightened orthodoxy (if not its practice) are reason, regard for truth, tolerance, and a sense of proportion. Self-knowledge, on the other hand, is harder to come by. Can these tenets be preached by uncomprehending oppressors and exploiters? Of course, they can. But that also is beside the point. Indifference, oppression and exploitation are not inherent in those values (whatever the ideologues may say) but, rather, such things are a betrayal of them by false prophets. *By their fruits ye shall know them.*

They are values that are also lacking in the rabid pursuit of critical theory - which may have begun as a quite reasonable philosophical endeavour in the school-halls of Frankfurt but which, in the minds and hands of its ideological acolytes, has now become a vehicle for persecution and intolerance. We remember that in the course of a single century (the fourth) Christianity went from being a persecuted minority to disputational, inquisitorial, heretic-hunting oppressors who blighted Europe for a thousand years (as well as laying the foundations of western civilisation, of course). The more important consideration is not what are the intrinsic merits of the values being promoted but what are the civilised (and civilising) manners – an old-fashioned word, but an appropriate one - that should prevail as part of our offence for Truth and our defence against unreason.

This journey of ethical remembering [allows] us to examine the nature of commemoration itself and how it might unburden us of history’s capacity to create obstacles to a better, shared future ... different, informed perspectives on the same events can and do exist. The acceptance of this fact can release us from the pressure of finding, or subscribing to, a singular unifying narrative of the past ... [Michael D Higgins \(Irish President\)](#)

Sounds like parallel provenance to me. But then, I would say that, wouldn't I?

HOW SHOULD HOUSES OF MEMORY RESPOND?

What should we do if we want to continue carrying out our mission in the teeth of demands that we change coming from the culture warriors? Do we stiffen our resolve or submit? Can we change (without yielding to excess) but still honour our fundamental values while learning from impassioned calls for Justice? Memorialising. Do we follow the map or the compass?

2018, Jan 8: Archives without archives Non-traditional archives that are inclusive

2018, Sep 12: Guardians for Truth? Should archivists stand up for objectivity, impartiality, and truth?

2020, May 13: Archiving the present Houses of memory initiating records formation

2020, Jun 28: What a difference ... (4) Houses of memory must respond Calls to arms!

2020, Jly 2: I'm offended Avoiding giving umbrage when describing records

2020, Aug 22: What a difference ... (6) ... what is "in scope"? Archivists use a compass, not a map

2020, Nov 15: What a difference ... (7) Conflicted memories Remembering World War II

2021, Feb 12: What a difference ... (8) Healing memories Remember, understand, and respect

2021, Mar 29: What a difference ... (9) Are we prisoners of our own identity or critical thinkers?

2018, January 8: Archives without archives

An [interesting concept](#) :

... for a long time, scholars and archival activists in South Africa lamented about archives repositories that are characterised by low usage, lack of skills, infrastructure and recognition by authorities ... The western way of understanding the archives continued to be given more space to develop in South Africa, while the indigenous way is not given even a sliver of attention ... "As things stand, the only archives of any note in South Africa are those of the various former colonies, the Boer republics and, after 1910, the Union Government of South Africa. Just like in Australia, the public domain has not been accommodating to indigenous models of knowledge production ... archival holdings in South African archives repositories do not reflect the diversity of the nation but mostly the interests of those who were previously in power. As a result, the users of such archives are mostly the beneficiaries of apartheid and colonial governments."

... One way of redressing this imbalance, he said, is through restructuring services at a local level closer to the people. "In South Africa, opportunity to transform the archival system has been presented in the past, but missed and continues to be missed by the archival communities. As a result, transformation is curtailed to skin colour by hiring more and more black people in the archives arena instead of transforming archival holdings and access ... public archives in South Africa have been unable to transform themselves into active documenters of society and thereby fail to fulfil their mandate of collecting non-public records with enduring value of national significance and to document aspects of the nation's experience neglected by archives repositories in the past. "This mandate positions archives to play an important role in redress, transformation and knowledge production ..."

... the current archival records preserved in South Africa's mainstream archives largely consist of documents that were generated after the arrival of the Europeans in this part of the world. These records, which are stored in archival repositories, mostly in paper and microfilm formats, reflect very little about the indigenous communities. "Therefore, it is important that the lives of ordinary people should be documented. This will also help to close the gap that exists in terms of archival holdings in public archival repositories, which reflect mostly white privilege. Oral source is an important part of recreation and rethinking of the past, especially to those who had never had an opportunity in the past ... One way of building an inclusive archive, said Professor Ngoepe, is through embarking on a national oral history project that adopts the model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Furthermore, the South African government should consider developing a policy on inter-repository repatriation of archives to the communities about which they were created. "Failure to address the situation of 'archives without archives' will render these repositories white elephants and empty vessels."

I'm confused. The speaker wants to redress imbalance through changes to holdings and access.

A. Holdings:

1. Is oral history the principal way to document hidden voices?
2. How can documenting gaps (instead of passively receiving product) go back very far in time? Is there a difference between oral history and oral tradition?
3. If archivists do not de-accession the records of colonial/white administrations won't they still be performing the role of archives with archives?

4. If oral history is treated as archives won't that be the same also? Is it the nature of the mission that changes (holding things that aren't archives instead)?
5. Can shaping of the "official" record (via documentation and appraisal policies) do anything to fill in the gaps? What happens to impartiality then - when an access purpose is built into the process of formation?

B. Access:

1. Shouldn't we also be re-imagining how to broaden access to those records of colonial/white administrations we already hold?
2. Might not broadening the scope of documentation activity to encompass more and more communities result in material in the archives that interests fewer and fewer? Because more narrowly focussed like a cultural who-do-you-think-you-are jigsaw (it's all about me-me-me). What price white elephants then?
3. Does the multiplication of "alternative" sources broaden or confuse the story told by the archives we hold? How could it all be contextualised? When does the archivist cross the line between custodian and teller-of-tales?

With reference to B.3, I refer you to the session on Documenting Australian Society presented by McCausland, Piggott, Shapley et al to the 2015 Hobart Conference and my [subsequent musings](#) on how this could be integrated into an access gateway based on my *Modest Proposal*.

2018, September 12: Guardians for Truth?

When I recently posted from the SAA/ARA Conferences, I made the claim that objectivity, impartiality, and accuracy are in our DNA. I was, of course, aware that in the post-modernist age of relativism, this claim has been widely discredited amongst us – as have those values more generally. There is no truth, one claim is as good as another, everything is relative – as if a fair minded balance is incompatible with impartiality instead of being its most likely result. Respecting other views has become the rationale for shutting down debate (de-platforming); fairness has given birth to the monstrosity that is 18C. The Coalition wants to protect religious freedoms, which is a nonsense; we should be protecting all freedoms, not just religious ones. In a dark corner of my soul, there is rejoicing that many of those who have attacked those values in the service of devaluing or suppressing what they don't like and exalting or enforcing what they support are now dismayed when their tools of destruction and oppression are adopted by others (as it was inevitable they would be) to attack what they themselves hold near and dear. A case of the biter bit, or be careful what you wish for. The whine of outrage runs through the latest [editorial](#) in *The Conversation*:

Over the past few years you will have heard a lot about fake news ... Trust in media is in decline globally, and every time we talk about fake news we hasten the trend by spreading a myth of false equivalence. With Donald Trump labelling everything short of sycophantic praise as "fake news", too many people are falling into the trap of thinking "they're all as bad as each other". But they're not, and the differences matter. The New York Times might make mistakes, but its editorial standards are qualitatively superior to those at Fox News or a conspiracy theorist's blog. In Australia the ABC has recently been under attack for giving a platform to Steve Bannon, but its rare debatable judgement calls actually underline its overall commitment to quality. We should be willing to critique media outlets robustly, but if we forget how to give credit where it's due we destroy the incentive for media outlets to hold themselves to a higher standard ... We don't claim to be perfect, but we do claim to be different in ways that matter, and we think that's something you ought to know about.

How interesting that in this apparent plea for liberal values the editorialist still snipes at the ABC for giving a voice to Bannon as a "rare debatable judgement call" – still wanting (seemingly) to shut down those he/she disagrees with. A true commitment to quality requires that you give the Bannons and the other ratbags an opportunity to speak.

13 September, 2018: The terms impartiality and objectivity refer to different things tho' they may be closely related (at least in the minds of some). Impartiality may refer to

- a quality of the archives themselves derived from the circumstances of their creation which we try to preserve,

- a value we aspire to cultivate in ourselves when handling archives (e.g. appraisals),,
- our approach to the interpretation and description of archives...

It is my understanding that some r/keepers question the possibility of the latter two (maybe all three).

[Chris Gousmett](#) says <<The strong claims of objectivity made by positivists have been refuted since we all perceive the world from specific situatedness within it and not as detached observers.>> Quite so. If anyone should understand how context (situatedness) impacts on observation and understanding of the record surely it must be us. When we present or preserve a record within a stated context it is not our understanding that confers meaning but the context into which we have chosen to place it. Some argue that this decision-making on our part (which context to give it) precludes any claims by us to impartiality. But it is possible to contextualise more adroitly. Hence parallel provenance which, in a nutshell, provides a mechanism for archivists to hold and present two different and possibly contradictory views of the same record simultaneously.

2018, October 31: How archivists could stop deepfakes from rewriting history

<<[LisaG](#): ... archival documentation is not *just* about documenting the context of the content ... I worry about the perception that it is the archivists role to 'solve' issues of authenticity by examining provenance ... "The more disturbing possibility with deepfakes is that historical records will include manipulated media presented as reality, whether that's because an archivist wasn't able to identify a video's origin correctly or because someone was able to infiltrate records and manipulate them." ... What role does the archivist and the archive have in these contexts? Thoughts?>> For me the answer is fairly simple ('cos I'm a simple-minded person, I guess). Recordkeepers (including archivists) make and keep records – all records, not just “historical records”. That means, inter alia, preserving records that exist and need to go on existing (as well as some concern with important matters where reliable records are not being made/kept) and all that means (inter alia) preserving the meaning of records as well as their fabric. If you doubt that records have meaning that can be preserved, you should be in another line of work. Can meaning be ambiguous and contested? Of course it can. Does that mean that “meaning” is meaningless? Of course it does not. Explaining and documenting the meaning of records goes some way to “solving” authenticity issues but not the whole way. And we don't do that merely by “examining provenance”; we do it in various ways (including an examination of structure). We shouldn't claim to be providing a complete authentication but we shouldn't shrink from our time-honoured role in a postmodern funk either. We do the best we can, as transparently as we can, and as honestly as we can.

Just as users of records must make their own evaluation of the records, they must also make their own evaluations of our poor efforts to establish and preserve their meaning. Like everything else in this wicked world, what we do (if we do it with a good heart and honest intent) is better than nothing. Fake news didn't come out of nowhere; it was born and bred in the swamp of relativism. How ironic it is that upholders of that flawed doctrine are now being bitten themselves by the uglies who have learned from them (all too well) how to throw doubt and confusion on honest endeavours at understanding. As I have argued elsewhere, we are not alone in this struggle. Librarians and curators have a similar mission – along with scientists, scholars, philosophers, fact-checkers, whistleblowers and many others who stand up for truth and accuracy. Their ways are not exactly the same as our ways but we share a common persona as truth-tellers. Or, at any rate, that is what we should aspire to. Relating to my earlier posting on “Documenting Australian Society” I would say that truth-telling (one of many methods we employ which has nothing to do with collecting per se) is an important support for that objective also.

Exposing deep-fakes is not, I believe, our primary role - but we can sometimes be helpful. Witness the role of the Bundesarchiv in exposing the fake Hitler Diaries. In the past, archives and archivists have been involved in faking the record(s) so establishing and maintaining our bona fides can be a struggle. From the *Donation of Constantine* to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, fake documents have been used to promote special interests. [James Addison Reavis](#) famously “forged ... documents in archives in Guadalajara, Mexico and Madrid ... to establish a line of inheritance for the Spanish Peralta Barons of Arizona ...” in order to uphold a fraudulent land grant claim. The move into digital space complicates the

forensics but we know a lot more now about digital authenticity and that has much to do with provenance, structure, and the way assets are managed digitally and about how those things are documented.

2019, October 25: ADELAIDE 2019 – Keynote 1 Feminist Standpoint Appraisal

There are two senses in which Prof. Michelle Caswell's Keynote Address told us what we already knew. She focussed on appraisal but her argument goes to deeper things. All archival procedures (creation, appraisal, description, digitisation, and so on) rest on how we understand the records and (by extension) how records are to be understood by the society we serve. Because of the influence we have, society's understanding of the records is powerfully swayed by ours (but not ultimately controlled by us because we ain't God).

- ◆ For many, her call to recalibrate and promote the viewpoint of the oppressed, the excluded, and the downtrodden struck a chord that went beyond appraisal theory and practice – it reinforced and celebrated an ideological persuasion they already had. To make the point, she and her admirers allude to power structures that have, until now, determined the privileged, unbalanced, and selective viewpoint they suppose has informed what archivists have hitherto done. We are invited to sneer at Schellenberg and Jenkinson as examples of that lack of balance but Jenkinson was so wary of bias that he denied the archivist a role in appraisal altogether; his conclusion on this is unsustainable but his motives are unmistakable. This is the now familiar denial of the Archivist's aspiration to put Truth and Integrity at the centre of what we do. It resonates with earlier discussion on this list about objectivity - we can't be objective, so don't bother trying – which I will only [recall here](#). It is curious to me that many who hold this view seem equally passionate about the role of archives in upholding authenticity, trust, justice, integrity, and freedom but that's just me I suppose, misunderstanding the incongruity.

- ◆ For others, the critique of what Caswell calls “unmarked views” in the archival process will be equally heartily endorsed but on professional rather than ideological grounds. It needs no feminist come from afar to tell us this. Multiplicity lies at the heart of how we think and what we do - the underlying proposition being that records cannot be understood (and therefore cannot be handled) from a single “viewpoint”. It's what we've been on about for the last 60 years. It's what the continuum **is**. And in parallel provenance I have propounded a methodology for incorporating alternative views into our work. One does not expect most North American or European archivists to understand this or even to have heard of it (it's like we've been on a different planet all these years) but pique cannot prevent us from endorsing their perceptions of it when they finally arrive at the right conclusion.

Essentially, what parallel provenance amounts to is putting both the archivist and the user into the archival process (and hence into our understanding of creation, appraisal, description, digitisation, etc.) so that they are no longer unmarked. It's not about doing this in a fluffy, feel-good, reconstructed-thinking kind of way. It's about doing it in a precise, technical, material kind of way so that they are **there** not just in our understanding but in the fruits of our endeavour. From our “viewpoint” then there was much to welcome in what she said about rectifying a monocular understanding of records and recordkeeping but that cannot be said of her proposals for rectification.

If what Caswell wants is to replace one tyranny with another, then FSA won't just rectify, it will displace white male oppression with feminist viewpoint oppression.

Feminist standpoint appraisal inverts [*my emphasis*] dominant appraisal hierarchies ... explicitly and unapologetically [giving] epistemological weight (and thereby assigning value to) records created and preserved by ... those individuals and communities oppressed by capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy ... [shifting] our thinking about the position of the archivist, from a purportedly “view from nowhere” (which in fact belies a dominant but unnamed white male position), towards archivist as a socially located, culturally situated agent who centers ways of being and knowing from the margins ... [calling] on archivists who inhabit dominant identities to acknowledge their *oppressor* standpoints and actively work to dismantle them.” Caswell [Dusting for fingerprints](#) pp.6-7.

I found my imagination relocating to a place 100 years hence when the white male viewpoint has been dismantled, inversion has occurred, and a white feminist viewpoint now dominates (I heard nothing to suggest that Caswell could legitimately identify with a black feminist viewpoint). May we suppose that white males and black feminists will then be over-borne epistemologically by white feminists and that Caswell's strictures against oppression will apply to the dominant white feminist viewpoint? How could they not?

If, in the alternative, Caswell is arguing (in effect) for multiplicity, it is our duty to tell her that giving epistemological weight to anything is forbidden to her. Multiplicity explicitly and unapologetically eschews the partiality she advocates (even as a corrective). Objectivity means not privileging any viewpoint or ideological position. This is an unfashionable idea and those of the Caswell persuasion deny it is even possible. We cannot free ourselves of our identity, we are prisoners of it. We are simply gibbering automatons tugged hither and yon by the strings that attach to the circumstances of our gender and race. Escape is impossible. If no choice is involved, where then lies the virtue in celebrating one viewpoint over another? The theologians tell us that without free will there can be no sin. If it were true that I am prisoner of a white, male viewpoint (it's not) I can't be blamed for it because I'm controlled by my identity and by extension Caswell and her admirers can't be praised because they don't have a choice either. But, of course, this is all nonsense. When you lay it out plain and simple, the determinists will usually back-track rapidly. No, no, that's not what we meant, you've misunderstood. We only want to rectify bias not to impose our viewpoint. Well, I was there and that's not what it sounded like. [Read the tweets](#).

Multiplicity is our best available archival methodology for upholding partiality (of any kind). But (paradoxically) the only effective way it can sustain and empower partiality is by maintaining its own objectivity. In case this sounds too clever by half, I will put it as simply as I can:

I don't want to "dismantle" dominant white male viewpoints; I want to lay aggressive feminist viewpoints alongside of them.

We don't combat bias and subjectivity by deploring and exposing them in conference papers. We combat them (as good archivists should) by contextualising and documenting them and by making proper allowance for them in our work.

2020, May 13: Archiving the present

Memory institutions are [documenting](#) the pandemic:

The State Library of Victoria is working to enlist an army of citizen collectors who can help it gather Covid-19 related materials. This is the idea behind [Memory Bank: A Collective Isolation Project](#), the library's major pandemic archiving project.

"A citizen collector really needs to be an anthropologist for the future and to think about the kinds of things that we take for granted that someone in the future may find absolutely fascinating," says a senior curator, Carolyn Fraser. She lists leaflets, pamphlets and temporary take-out menus as examples of items that the library might be interested in acquiring ... the library is also releasing a series of weekly prompts which will encourage people to share details about their pandemic lives ...

... The New South Wales State Library [is] asking people to share pictures from self-isolation on social media using the hashtag #NSWathome ... People are also being encouraged to keep a written record. [The Diary Files](#) is another of the Covid-19 projects launched by the SLNSW ...

We used to say that archives are formed un-selfconsciously and without intent as to third-party use but some of us would now say that r/keeping is usually purposeful (created for one intention or another) without necessarily being intended for random third-party use – e.g. the diary dilemma (what or who is the diarist writing for?). Indeed, understanding the intention of the records-maker is an important part of understanding its context. I have gone further and speculated that we need the concept of the accidental record/archive – viz. a documentary survival that was never intended to be kept (cf. the "NAP") and might truly be said to be devoid of purpose.

What I find interesting here is the directed nature of what is going on, the primary purpose both of the creator and the collector being to form an historical record. The material is being gathered

contemporaneously for no other purpose. Lots of juice there for an extended debate about the nature of r/keeping.

At a more mundane level, however, what interests me is the mechanics. Letters and diaries have given way to email and social media and efforts are in place to “archive” some of this. But broad-brush harvesting results in voluminous and incoherent accretions. Diaries and letters used to be the bread-and-butter of personal archiving. Perhaps themed citizen-collecting (in all sorts of post-pandemic areas) offers a new way. With the attendant dangers, of course, of evil intent (ideology, propaganda, etc.) and innocent frailty (bias, prejudice, etc.) about which Jenkinson would have something to say.

<<[Joanna Sassoon:...here in Western Australia the cultural institutions have also jumped on the contemporary collecting bandwagon, though with some confusion as to the collecting roles of a Museum, a State Library and a State Archive/Records office ... "The Museum will approach recording these times in two distinct ways which we have called 'Collecting the State' and 'Collecting the Community' ... Collecting the State will focus on the leading role that is the responsibility of our political leaders, state government agencies and other key sectors. Collecting the Community will take a people-first approach to exploring the experiences of individuals and communities across WA."](#)>>

2020, May 16: Very Model of a Mad Roman Emperor

According to that purveyor of Fake News, [Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus](#) (c69-p122 AD), the Emperor Caligula planned to appoint his favourite horse, [Incitatus](#), to the Senate – although he [never actually did](#). This legend may simply be a “joke [that] has been interpreted as historical fact.” A second source, Cassius Dio (155-235 AD), tells us that Incitatus was, in fact, made a priest. In 2016, the Comet Restaurant in Washington D.C. was accused of child-sex-trafficking ([Pizzagate](#)). This latter falsehood (and its debunking) is documented by many more than two sources – for and against.

[After Truth: Disinformation and the Cost of Fake News](#) is a chilling documentary that has just screened on pay TV. It was depressing for its content (the subversion of Truth) but also, I felt, for moral and intellectual confusion when it came to channelling a response and for the air-time it gave to those who argued that suppression was the answer - to say nothing of those promoting White Fake News as the antidote to Black Fake News. I am with those who argued instead that Truth is the only proper response to Lies. The programme was also weak in not identifying how post-Truth is a disease affecting the Left as well as the Right (cf. [Covington Kids](#)) and not looking beneath its manifestations into its underlying cause – viz. [Relativism](#). Indeed, I have suggested in an [earlier post](#) to this List that Trump is the child of post-modernism, noting the distinction between Relativism and [Pluralism](#).

I follow certain litmus tests. If it sounds too outrageous to be true it probably is. Any whiff of ideology predisposes me against belief. Transparency and rigour of process combined with consistency are qualities I look for and value. So, what has all this got to do with us? It has to do with the role of citizen archivists. Does it not raise the question of how collectors deal with contributors having an agenda (as most of them will have, to a greater or lesser extent)?

Selective suppression of Facebook, Twitter, etc, is the answer of some to the problem of Fake News and the parallel for us would be a view that collectors have a similar duty to filter contributions from citizen archivists. On this argument, the content would be supplied but the context (its meaning and structure) would need to be imposed by the collector unless the collector takes the further step of actually rejecting (suppressing) some contributions. That simply shifts the spotlight from the bias of the contributor onto the bias of the collector. If the contributions are artefacts of some kind, gathered but not created by contributors and not involving the contributor's opinions beyond the process of selection, it may be a question of sourcing the artefact and questioning its origins (provenance). This new definition of citizen archivist (not just as volunteers in the work of the archives but as hunter-gatherers of archival source material however dubious, however genuine) needs reflection and debate and a revivification perhaps of the dispute over impartiality.

PS. How's this for irony: If you Google "Covington kids" you get – in my view - a reasonably reliable and nuanced analysis from Wikipedia coming out on top (outlining the initial left-wing misrepresentation of the affair and subsequent recantation by some, but not all, of those responsible) followed in second place by a *New York Post* opinion piece using the incident to lambast the Left media. A case of bias, instead of being understood as a warning against ideology of any kind, has become a weapon in furtherance of the culture wars. Immediately, without going beyond page one, we the users of the information supplied by Google are faced with the (unavoidable) task of discriminating between the sources.

2020, May 17 <<[Chris Gousmett](#):... if we are to be serious about context when accessioning records, then is not the whole "fake news" phenomenon part of that context of the events of our day? If we retain a selection of records from the present, will they be comprehensible in the future without the "fake news" they may be responding to, bouncing off, perpetuating, etc.? That is, is "fake news" itself worthy of retention as an archive of an important cultural phenomenon of our age? We may reject the suggestion of retaining erroneous opinion/propaganda as an archive but we need to ensure that archival collections reflect the whole of our age and not just a slice that we would prefer had happened in isolation. That is, are we showing bias in favour of one part of the cultural phenomenon and ignoring another equally prominent part, much as we might wish it did not exist?>>

<<[Michael Piggott](#): This is one of the worries I have whenever an institution, an historian, a research project with an on trend topic attractive to resource allocators, whoever - builds a collection via public appeals to contribute your "stuff" (look at me, this is how I coped during the lock down, etc). Yet another library has now joined the bandwagon, the [SLV](#). "We're calling on all Victorians to join us as we inaugurate the Memory Bank to archive what everyday life in Victoria is *actually like now*, during this time of collective isolation". Putting aside the question why didn't you want to document everyday life twenty years ago, shouldn't we also want to document examples of people who wouldn't contribute in a fit to these appeals ... >>One of those interviewed on *After Truth* ... conjured up a truly frightening vision. Suppose, she asked, that post-Truth narratives continue to proliferate? What will happen in twenty years when someone does an Internet search for "[Sandy Hook](#)" and the first three pages of results display claims that it was a hoax? If that doesn't terrify you, I can't imagine what will. So, as Michael's question reminds us. the collector may fail twice over -

- Collaborating in the construction of a false and misleading narrative based on the urgings of self-selecting contributors.
- Constructing an unbalanced narrative that omits those who do not contribute (Terry Cook's [hidden voices](#)).

What a dilemma! The only remedy seems to be for the archivist to intervene in the service of Truth – thereby violating Jenkinson's warning not "to import into the collection under his charge what we have been throughout most anxious to keep out of it, an element of his personal judgement". And if we do yield to temptation and import our personal judgement, how can anyone know that we are telling the Truth? They will only know if we can establish (or maintain) archives as trusted sources of Truth. Laugh at Jenkinson if you want, but can there be any doubt that his intention was just that - to keep the archives pure and unsullied. We screw around with that at our peril.

2020, May 18 *The only remedy seems to be for the archivist to intervene in the service of Truth.*

But doesn't that commit the very mistake against which Jenkinson warns? The logic of his position is his famous denial that archivists have a role in appraisal. While we can admire the courage that led him to this conclusion, we cannot endorse it because we know that the archivist is a flawed defender of Truth as a result of our participation (conscious or unconscious) in the process. If we want archives to be trusted despite this flaw, it can only be on the basis of our values. There is a choice to be made between-

- We must try to be as impartial and objective as we possibly can, and
- Oh well, hey ho, it can't be helped, so let's not worry about it.

Do we trust the mainstream media and (if so) on what basis? It can only be on the basis of **their** values which were nowhere more debased than in their [failure](#) to properly report on Iraq War 2. The hindsight defence is now used that the Coalition of the Willing (US, Australia, Britain) got it wrong but it was a genuine mistake. But the lies were apparent at the time and most in the media failed to pursue them -

Most of the administration's case for that war made absolutely no sense, specifically the notion that Saddam Hussein was allied with Osama bin Laden. That one from the get-go rang all the bells — a secular Arab dictator allied with a radical Islamist whose goal was to overthrow secular dictators and reestablish his Caliphate? The more we examined it, the more it stank. The second thing was rather than relying entirely on people of high rank with household names as sources, we had sources who were not political appointees. One of the things that has gone very wrong in Washington journalism is 'source addiction,' 'access addiction,' and the idea that in order to maintain access to people in the White House or vice president's office or high up in a department, you have to dance to their tune. That's not what journalism is about. We had better sources than she ([Judith Miller](#)) did and we knew who her sources were. They were political appointees who were making a political case. I first met him ([Ahmed Chalabi](#)) in '95 or '96. I wouldn't get dressed in the morning based on what he told me the weather was, let alone go to war. [John Walcott](#)^[10]

To keep the cockroaches from coming back, you have to keep spraying and you have to [keep working at it](#) to remain credible and to demonstrate the necessary values-

... Relying on The Times, or McClatchy or any other news source, for all the truth is dumb, but it's infinitely preferable to the pernicious philosophical notions that there is no such thing as truth, that truth is relative, or that, as some journalists seem to believe, it can be found midway between the two opposing poles of any argument ... Does the truth lie halfway between say, slavery and abolition, or between segregation and civil rights, or between communism and democracy? ... The idea that truth is merely a social construct, that it's subjective, in other words, first appeared in academia as a corruption of post-modernism, but it's taken root in our culture without our really realizing it or understanding its implications.

... Although this kind of thinking, relativism and constructivism, started on the left, many conservatives now feel empowered by it, too, and some of them have embraced it with a vengeance on issues ranging from global warming and evolution to the war in Iraq ... There is not one truth for Fox News and another for The Nation. Fair is not always balanced, and balanced is not always fair ... I'm not talking here about matters of taste or of partisan politics or, heaven help us, of faith: Whether Monet or Manet was a better painter or whether Jesus was the Messiah, a prophet or a fraud. Those are personal matters, beliefs, opinions and preferences of which we all must learn to be more tolerant ... Harry G. Frankfurt, an emeritus professor of philosophy at Princeton, puts it this way in a marvelous little book called, "On Truth" (which is the sequel to "On Bullshit"): "It seems ever more clear to me that higher levels of civilization must depend even more heavily on a conscientious respect for the importance of honesty and clarity in reporting the facts, and on a stubborn concern for accuracy in determining what the facts are."

2020, May 27: <<[Michael Piggott](#): The current pandemic continues to prompt...cultural heritage institutions to invite documentation...[Australia Post](#) has partnered with - curiously - the National Archives of Australia to encourage people to (literally) write letters addressed to "Dear Australia" and have them preserved by NAA. Australia Post says "This will enable all Australians to record their impressions of this remarkable time" ... They've been told where they can send a letter or upload their stuff. Problem solved.>>

2020, May 28: Records are timebound in the sense that their meaning is contingent upon what we know now about the circumstances of their formation then (even if then was only 10 seconds ago). Over thirty years ago, David Bearman reminded us of the long term consequences of discontinuity and how perilous such knowledge can be even in the present.

Accustomed as we are to viewing the record as physically fragile and in need of preservation, archivists were unprepared for Foote's two case studies suggesting the intellectual impermanence of recorded memory. The first case reviewed the efforts of an unusual interdisciplinary deliberative body, the Human Interference Task Force of the U.S. Department of Energy, which was charged with developing means to inform persons living 10,000 years from now of the presence of radioactive materials buried by our society. This group of semioticians, linguists, historians and scientists considered every possible way in which to notify the future of the simple fact of the danger of a radioactive site, and while it recommended a combination of markers and written records for such communications, it raised serious doubts about the value of either. The fundamental reason we cannot design a means to assure communications with the future is that human history, human languages, human cultures are too tentative to support communications across such distances of time. Like the electro-mechanical technologies that limit transportability of data in our own era, social technologies and constructs are likely to turn our best constructed messages to noise.

Dr. Foote's second argument was based on case studies of how societies purposefully forget, how they manufacture stigma and efface material evidence in order to erase the past. He examined instances in which the psychological health of a community depended upon forgetting, as in Salem following the witchcraft trials. Foote noted that Germany has eradicated all Nazi party sites because, he suggested, they are far more dangerous to the present society than concentration camps since they reaffirm that the Nazis rose to power through democratic political mechanisms, however skewed and manipulated. One effect of Dr. Foote's work is to bring into crisp focus the shortness of civilized time in the scale of human history, just as paleobiologists so crudely alert us to the brevity of human time in the scale of life. David Bearman, *Archival Methods* (1989) ch. VI

Many years ago, I intervened in a list-serv debate over the impermanence of storage media for electronic records by reporting an archaeological find of ancient correspondence between two court officials named Ham-u-let and Hor-e-teo. Enough could be deciphered for archaeologists to surmise that the officials were lamenting the loss of important data that had been consigned to clay tablets. Repeated references to a "cursed spite" led scholars to hypothesize that a spite was a container for housing clay tablets which became cursed when the necessary religious incantations were incorrectly pronounced over it with the result that tablets crumbled to dust within it. Disparaging references were made to the efforts of a team of despised copyists from Gaza who spent their time duplicating writings from one tablet to another.

2020, 28 June: What a difference ... (4) Houses of memory must respond

Anything but neutral

... How can institutions whose leadership is often overwhelmingly White rethink their staffing, collections and exhibitions, much less move toward more truly equitable governance? Or, some ask, should museums continue to exist in anything like their current form? ... "This is an historic moment -- a pause and reflect moment for individuals and institutions," said Makeba Clay, the chief diversity officer at the Phillips Collection in Washington, DC, ... "The systemic and unrelenting injustices against members of the Black community have existed for hundreds of years and continue to exist all around us, including in our museums. We know we have work to do and that means being actively anti-racist -- not passively non-racist." ... her message is that it's not enough to "amplify" voices and messages, art institutions must take action ... Clay also said that art does not exist outside struggle. That while it can be used for "constructive discourse, building empathy and creating community," art also "can confront current issues and topics that aren't neutral." Adding: "What appears like radical action is exactly what museums need to pursue to prove that they have a valuable role to play in this national discourse."

Becoming sites for debate

Last Friday Jill Snyder, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland (MoCA), stepped down from her role after 22 years as the gallery's executive director. The resignation was announced in the wake of a controversy surrounding the cancellation of an exhibition by artist Shaun Leonardo, whose "The Breath of Empty Space," which deals with police brutality against Black and brown boys and men, was due to launch at MoCA this month. The decision to cancel the exhibition was made in February this year [and] the museum sent a statement of apology to Leonardo, in which they say, "we were not prepared to engage with the lived experiences of pain and trauma that the work evokes," ... MoCA followed this up with an apology to Leonardo ... which states: "[R]egretfully we did not engage Mr. Leonardo in creating space for dialogue and debate. We did not expand the conversation within our community... We failed. We are learning now." ... What follows is an edited account of Shaun Leonardo's recent experiences and thoughts on the need for institutions to do better, shared during a conversation with CNN's Ananda Pellerin.

... Over the last decade there has been a rise in exhibitions that show work by Black and brown artists at major art institutions. This, I say, is the easy part. The difficult part for institutions is to do what's necessary to hold BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) audiences with care ... So much of that responsibility is shifted onto artists who are propped up as the voice, as the commitment to these difficult dialogues, while the institutions do not truly push themselves to change ... a White institution can't enter a true and difficult relationship with the Black and brown community until they understand their whiteness and their privilege within that dynamic, not to mention the historical complexity of how we have all arrived at this moment ...

Institutions have to do two things: they have to do the internal work of assessing what it means to be an institution with gatekeeping power, and secondly, they need to confront their resistance to making room for Black and brown leadership, so those voices are already present within ... if museums resist contending with the power that they hold, we should no longer rely on them to curate the spaces for these kinds of experiences. Putting a painting on the wall is not enough. What feels different in this moment is that museums are now competing with one another in terms of what they're going to commit to. The earlier messaging around inclusivity and anti-racism was empty -- a continuation of the lip service we've seen over the past decade -- the "we will do better" that is never delivered ... We must all stay tuned to see how the institutions act in the coming years. And we all must interject when they don't. Beyond this, what I hope is that the role museums play will shift. That they will become sites for debate -- places of constructive interpersonal conflict meant not to reap immediate resolve, but to enter into complexities of thought and emotion that the rest of the world will not allow. That accountability is what I want from museums. And as an artist, this is what I'm committing to when I work with these institutions.

2020, July 1: The [Africa Museum](#) is a near perfect instance of a house of memory that has already had to "contend" with facts concerning its [subject-matter as well as its own history](#). It may still have a way to go before appeasing the spirit of Joseph Conrad.

The **Royal Museum for Central Africa** or RMCA ... colloquially known as the **Africa Museum**, is an ethnography and natural history museum situated in Tervuren ... just outside Brussels. It was built to showcase [King Leopold II's Congo Free State](#) in the [1897 World Exhibition](#) ... After his [Congo Free State](#) was recognized by the [Berlin Conference](#) of 1884–1885, [King Leopold II](#) wanted to publicise the [civilizing mission](#) and the economic opportunities available in the colony to a wider public, both in Belgium and internationally ... The museum stores archives documenting its own institutional history, as well as archives of private businesses, organizations, and individuals ... The publicly accessible museum itself only represents 25 percent of the activities which the museum covers ...

It had been called a museum that "has remained frozen in time" as it showed how a museum looked like in the mid-twentieth century. No mention was made of the savage excesses and pillage during Belgium's colonial era. *The Guardian* reported in July 2002 that, after initial outrage by Belgian historians over [King Leopold's Ghost](#) by [Adam Hochschild](#), the state-funded museum would finance an investigation into Hochschild's allegations. The resulting more modern exhibition "The Memory of Congo" (February–October 2005), tried to tell the story of the Congo Free State before it became a Belgian colony and a less one-sided view of the Belgian colonial era. The exhibition was praised by the international press, with French newspaper *Le Monde* claiming that "the museum has done better than revisit a particularly stormy page in history...[it] has pushed the public to join it in looking into the reality of colonialism."

It seems that this and other Belgian memory-houses are still ahead of [public opinion](#), which may ultimately prove less resistant to Hollywood razzamatazz than to cultural re-interpretation .

... debate over [Leopold's] legacy has remained muted in Belgium, where hundreds of roads are named after the king along with memorials dedicated to his memory and glory. Now, under pressure from a growing movement that believes Belgium needs to confront its past, attitudes in the corridors of power are starting to change. As part of a belated reckoning with its colonial history, museums are showcasing sins that were previously overlooked, the tone of history books in school is shifting and, in a development unthinkable until recently, cities have started to remove street signs commemorating Leopold II and openly denounce his legacy ...

While some municipalities are holding out, the reappraisal offers further evidence of a sea change in how the colonial history is viewed. Those resistant to change are likely to come under more pressure when a Hollywood film, based on [Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*] ... is released ... Earlier this year a UN working group concluded in its preliminary report that, nearly six decades after the newly named DRC gained independence from Belgium, many of the country's institutions remained racist and the state needed to apologise for the sins of its past as a step towards reform ...

2020, August 15:

... if museums resist contending with the power that they hold, we should no longer rely on them to curate the spaces for these kinds of experiences ... (Shaun Leonardo)

Another [example](#) of contending with both content and context -

Magnum Photos, one of the world's most celebrated photographic agencies, is to re-examine the content of its archive of more than 1 million images after accusations it made available photographs that critics said may show the sexual exploitation of minors ... As of Friday the Magnum archive was offline. An agency spokesman said: "Like many in the photographic industry, we are re-examining our past archives as we are aware there is material that may be inappropriate. Magnum has accumulated almost 1 million images over its 73-year history and we are committed to making this a comprehensive process." ...

While photo essays documenting sex workers and sexual exploitation have a long history in journalistic reportage photography, Magnum admitted it had been caught out, both by the **presence of some images** [my emphasis] in its archive, and by **the way they had been labelled in search terms** [my emphasis again] accessible to the wider public ...

What is the difference, I wonder, between a search term (merely) and one that is "accessible to the wider public". Should finding aids be more widely redacted? A further distinction is being made between content and the circumstances of creation-

... The criticism reflects a wider debate in the photographic industry over images, including some by celebrated photographers, which have been overtaken by a changing ethical landscape, not least over recording images of subjects seen as having been exploited ...

... Paul Lowe, who teaches documentary photography at the University of the Arts London and has written about the ethics of photojournalism, as well as being a well-known documentary photographer, suggested there were still questions to be answered for all photo agencies. "Any image that is currently available through any of the reputable agencies' websites has gone through process of control. Older images have been digitised and some sort of vetting has taken place. "An individual has decided that it's appropriate for the agency archive and what key words should be attached to it. No image is there by accident." He said the key issue related to consent. "What does consent and informed consent mean in photography? I think that's key. Even if a subject gives consent, does that mean you can do whatever you want with images that are problematic? "I think the whole photographic industry, across the board, are questioning their assumptions, not least the power structures and inherent way that photography has predominantly reflected male gaze, which leaves it very open to very strong arguments of exploitation."

2020, August 26: Some Readings

Curatorial Activism

No doubt many listers are already familiar with this work. I've only just come across it. Seems relevant to what we've been discussing in this thread.

"Curatorial Activism" is a term I use to designate the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art. It is a practice that commits itself to counter-hegemonic initiatives that give voice to those who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether—and, as such, focuses almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists.

Code of Ethics for Curators

Issued by American Association of Museums Curators Committee (2009). States, inter alia

Curatorial work is guided by the following values:

- To serve the public good by contributing to and promoting learning, inquiry, and dialogue, and by making the depth and breadth of human knowledge available to the public ...

... curators must establish intellectual control of the collection under their care ... Curators must commit themselves to developing the museum collection and interpretation of its objects with a respect for the needs of all potential patrons ... When preparing interpretive material, curators have a responsibility to an object's creator(s) and culture of origin. When possible and appropriate, they accurately and respectfully represent the creator's perspective, the object's historical and cultural context, and the object's history of use ...

Statement of Curatorial Values

Issued by Australian National Film and Sound Archive (n.d.). States, inter alia

Curators are bound to respect the diversity of ideas, values and beliefs in the community, and should not impose their own in deciding which works are to be collected. They are responsible for developing a collection that draws on and represents the diversity of cultural, political, social, religious and other ideas of individuals and groups in the past and present society, not just the dominant ideas of their time.

Should museums remain impartial? (2020)

... Is it the duty of museums to take a stance, or should we expect galleries and other cultural institutions to remain impartial on the subjects dominating our society? ... museums are not neutral by default. In most cases, neutrality requires more effort than asserting a clear view and, in the view of some, neutrality is an impossibility altogether – at odds with the human nature behind each and every exhibit created ... The question surrounding neutrality in museums is a complex one. So much so that the question itself isn't really "should museums be impartial?" but "can museums be impartial?" ... Democratic cultural spaces are made by aiming for neutrality, but by recalibrating the balance of power and giving voice to those who would otherwise struggle to be heard. Through social conscious exhibitions and outreach efforts, many museums are already playing their part in this, giving voice to what's important to their audience.

I can't help feeling there's a "not" missing in the 2nd last sentence quoted.

2020, September 14: Displaying human body parts has long been a hot topic for curators. Now, [an Oxford museum](#) has revised its practices –

For almost 80 years, the shrunken human heads at Oxford University's [Pitt Rivers Museum](#) have fascinated and appalled visitors ... But under a major revamp to address the museum's problematic colonial past, the heads ... have been removed from display, along with 113 other human remains, including decorated skulls, scalps and Egyptian mummies. When the Pitt Rivers, one of the world's most important ethnological museums, reopens later this month ... visitors will instead encounter an ethical display of its collection. This will address how exhibiting human remains has "reinforced racist and stereotypical thinking" of other cultures, portraying them as "savage, primitive or gruesome", said the museum's director, Dr Laura Van Broekhoven.

Van Broekhoven said most of the human remains removed from display came from India, Tibet, Malaysia, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, [Ecuador](#) and the Solomon Islands. Staff at the museum are reaching out to indigenous communities around the world to see whether they think the human remains removed from display, and hundreds more in its archives, should be repatriated to their country of origin, be redisplayed in a more respectful and accurate manner, or stay in storage.

Marenka Thompson-Odlum, a research assistant at the museum who [reviewed the labelling of objects](#), said many human remains were originally collected and exhibited by anthropologists who believed in now-debunked, racist scientific theories ... For example, archival records about 52 hair samples from the indigenous Ainu people of Japan exoticised their long hair and their beards. "They were termed 'the hairy Ainu' to explain that they were more 'barbaric' or 'savage'," said Thompson-Odlum, who added that the documents suggested some of the museum's samples were obtained by forcibly cutting Ainu people's hair ... Three of the Pitt Rivers' heads are thought to be authentic, with the other four believed to be forgeries made from corpses stolen from morgues and hospitals, a practice fuelled by demand from foreign collectors between the 1870s and 1930s...

How far should this approach go? Will Egyptian mummies disappear from museums around the world? Who would be consulted about them and to whom would they be repatriated?

What is interesting here (for me) is that they are turning the display inside out. Instead of adopting a scholarly, objective tone – presenting the artefacts (possibly fallaciously) for informative purposes – they are turning the spotlight onto the ethics and integrity of curatorial practice and putting that on display. How far should curators go in contextualising curation itself for our users?

How far should apprehended bias on the part of the curator be acknowledged and whose apprehension should be preferred? When do legitimate doubts about our own prejudices begin to undermine confidence in our ability to discern the truth?

2020, September 18: <<[Michael Piggott: Bias, truth, objective tone, human remains. Sounds like the Australian War Memorial to me.](#) Earlier this week, [William De Maria wrote:](#)

Then there is the Memorial's unapologetic distortion of our military history. There is no critical examination of the pointlessness of so many aggressive engagements Australia has been involved in and of the shameful things done by Australian soldiers on the battlefield. Consider the historical distortions in the Afghanistan War Exhibition, which go well beyond how museums and memorials in the other Coalition allies portray their presence in that war. The US Veterans History Museum starts its exhibition with these words: "The United States has been stuck in an unwinnable quagmire in Afghanistan for years." Then there's this contemplation of the British intervention from the National Army Museum in Chelsea:

"The war in Afghanistan spanned the tenures of three prime ministers and cost the lives of 453 British service personnel and thousands of Afghans. What was accomplished after 13 years of conflict, which included eight years of heavy fighting in Helmand, *still remains open to debate.*" (my emphasis added).

At the peak of the British input to the Afghanistan War, there were 137 UK bases and about 9,500 British troops in Helmand Province alone. At the height of the fighting, more than 600 flights a day used Camp Bastion's 3.5-kilometre runway. Similarly, the Danish War Museum's exhibition *A Distant War – A Danish Soldier in Afghanistan*, avoids the Rambo script in favour of showing visitors a young Danish soldier's journey from the safety of his childhood bedroom to distant Afghanistan, through Camp Bastion, the Green Zone and Gereshk then home via Tune Airport. And this one was mounted without jiggling the donation tin in front of arms dealers.

This level of honesty is unimaginable at the Australian War Memorial. A visit to its Afghanistan exhibition is like a trip to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang, North Korea, where the curators leave nothing to chance that a different perspective could emerge.

Making all this worse is the Memorial's morally contaminated relationships with arms dealers.

2020, October 6:

What is interesting here (for me) is that they are turning the display inside out Instead of adopting a scholarly, objective tone – presenting the artefacts (possibly fallaciously) for informative purposes – they are turning the spotlight onto the ethics and integrity of curatorial practice and putting that on display. How far should curators go in contextualising curation itself for our users?

<<**Andrew Waugh: I'm struggling to see what the problem with this is...I would consider the reasons a collector collected a specific object to be consequently very important in understanding what the object is and what it represents.>>**

Coming Clean (no problem): IMHO custodians of memory – archivists, curators, librarians – need to be aware of their own motives and possible biases. They need to overcome their biases as far as possible and strive for objectivity, knowing they will never wholly succeed. I see no problem in disclosing our assumptions, practices, and motives (to the extent that we can objectively discern them). Nor do I see a problem in disclosing our own struggle, our own doubts and uncertainties. As to the perils of collection, I have long argued that archivists too have a special (and much neglected) duty to say much, much more in the finding aids about the appraisal process that led to the formation of the archives that the user sees. I have told the story before how, when I was on assignment at PROUK (now National Archives), an archivist there said to me that they didn't keep control records (registers and indexes) because they didn't want the public knowing what had been destroyed.

Curatorial Tone (bit of a problem): I don't think we've yet found our "curatorial voice" in the postmodern age. Adopting a curatorial tone of impartiality, based at least on an aspiration to be impartial, was once deemed to be a virtue. Custodians don't tamper with the records. They are inviolate in our hands and can be relied on to the extent that our integrity can be relied upon to ensure the "preservation of the chain of evidence". The belief that we can be trusted is an important tool in our box. The tone we adopt to uphold that belief sustains the trust of our clients in us (or so we would like to believe). Of course, nowadays, we understand about subconscious bias and that the archivist's own actions mean we are -makers as well as -keepers of records. Acknowledging that while at the same time establishing a basis on which to claim professional integrity (supposing you think that is a valuable quality to have or at least to portray) is, therefore, a bit of a problem.

Apprehended Bias (quite a problem): Add to all that the pressures now bearing down as a result of culture wars. The very idea of impartiality is scoffed at. Identity bias (racial, social, cultural, religious, ideological, etc.) is assumed. Apology or correction is demanded. The question is: how does the custodian deal with it? To what extent should our presentation acknowledge apprehended bias that we do not believe we have? Should we acknowledge it, yield to it, succumb to it, or combat it? How we would go about any of these alternative responses is a whole other discussion. And then, how do custodians keep their responses (whichever ones we choose) in proportion? Should we take account of the most deserving alternative views or the loudest? The culture wars evolve and move on. What is admired today is condemned tomorrow and (more subtly) what is ignored today becomes a hot issue tomorrow. If we must keep on adjusting to changing perceptions (which I don't say we shouldn't) how do we balance the integrity of our own interpretations against the interpretations that others would have us make.

Adjusting our practices to satisfy the ideas of others, rather upholding the integrity of our own, could be seen as falsification of the evidence no better than forgery. Acknowledging other ideas while defending our own is one thing. Subscribing to contested ideas in the culture wars makes us culture warriors – the object of disdain to one or more parties. It would be nice to think (As we once did) that we can curate without interpretation – but we can't. My question therefore comes down to this:

how can the archivist or the collector contextualise themselves in terms other than their own to disclose their "understanding [of] what the object is and what it represents" or even comprehend fully "the reasons a collector collected a specific object" except by asserting what they believe to be true and what acknowledgement should be made of understanding they believe to be false?

It was all so much easier when science, medicine, and professional expertise of all kinds weren't being denounced in the Age of Post-Truth. Ah, well!

2020, October 7: Back to statuary for a moment, Mary Beard (academic tv presenter on Roman history) gives [her views](#).

The Romans had many ways of dealing with the statues of those they no longer wanted to honour. Some they (or their enemies) destroyed ... But the Romans were much more imaginative than that. It was common practice to give a makeover to a marble head and to change the image of one emperor you didn't like into that one you did (or, to put it another way, to save money by recycling the old guy into the new). And occasionally you could even change one god into another just by changing the statue's label.

So where does this leave us in our current statue wars? Let me offer just a few observations.

1. There is no one (or almost no one) who thinks that there are no exclusions at all for statues that belong in the public realm. There would, I imagine, be very little public debate about the taking down of a statue of Goebbels or Jimmy Savile ... but we disagree on where we draw the line ...
2. It goes without saying that one can deplore the actions of the person portrayed in the statue, while not wanting to remove the object itself from public view ...
3. Too much of this debate has traded on a view of history that divides it into goodies and baddies ...
4. Much of this comes down to our understanding of the function of public statuary, and I hope that, when Sadiq Khan's [new commission](#) to look at the diversity of London's statuary (and more) gets under way, they will consider not just who is worthy to be commemorated, but what public sculpture is *for* ...
5. And as a parting shot, I bridle a little at the repeated suggestions that these statues belong in a museum ... How wrong can you get?

(Me speaking now)

Totally agree with no.5. Meanwhile, I have always been amused by two statues in central London. One is of [Oliver Cromwell outside Parliament](#). Why would anyone want to put it *there*? He's the only man who ever shut the place down. The other is nearby: [Boudicca stands triumphant](#) in her chariot, looking out over the Thames! Isn't she the one who burnt Londinium to the ground and brutally slaughtered everyone in sight? There's also one of her in Colchester apparently. Even curiuser.

2020, November 7: [Impartiality vs Objectivity; Balance vs Opinion](#)

Where were you when a US president stood up and claimed his own country's [election was corrupt](#) – and media organisations simply [cut him off](#) because he had no evidence for any of his mad, rambling allegations? ... while there is no question that Trump's comments and indeed behaviour over much of the

four years should have been called out long ago, there are still huge questions over journalists' relationships to neutrality and balance – and how time-stretched journalists can get this wrong ... true impartiality allows reporters to say that politicians are lying if there are facts and evidence to prove it. Such calls are essential not just for democracy but the future of journalism, even if a combination of financial, political and technological pressure has made them harder ... While US broadcasters are being celebrated, though, it seems wise to consider what the consequence of an increasingly opinionated journalism could be. Surely the endgame is Trump TV ... For Trump, said to be confused and upset by the loss of his biggest cheerleader in Murdoch, his own channel would be the perfect answer. In the UK, we have [GB News](#) and the proposed new [Murdoch TV channel](#) to look forward to.

Newly licensed ventures have seen how LBC has challenged the UK's public service television impartiality requirements by showing political balance across the whole day rather than one opinion or show at a time. This is akin to the US model where for every CNN for those who have hated Trump for years, there is a Fox News host slavishly promoting his every view. Given this, it would be wise if all those in the UK pumped by the passion and enthusiasm they can see on US TV reports and exasperated by an overly cautious BBC are careful what they wish for. Populist media, like populist politics, can be a dangerous game.

Substitute *collecting for reporting* and *culture wars for populism* and where does that leave us? An anti-slavery museum "balanced" by one celebrating colonialism perhaps?

2020, July 2: I'm offended

<<[Michael Piggott](#): ...Feeling or taking offence via an engagement with documents ... is a subset of what was once framed as "affect" and now more commonly as "trauma", as explained in an excellent article by Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright in the March 2020 A&M ... In archives, it's not only terms used in files or file titles, is it? It's subject matter too ... What about not words but images? ... And objects?...>>

2020, July 3 <<[Andrew Waugh](#): The latest, brand new, version of Trove tackles exactly this issue. It supports a pop-up that notifies readers of language/images that could be upsetting ... In the warning I'd be a little less coy - I'd explicitly state that, as an archive, we do not change the original record to remove offensive material. To do so would be to falsify what the original creator and society thought, and we do not cover up either. However, there is also the issue of finding aids. These should be rewritten as required to avoid offensive language, unless the language is required to understand the context or use the records...there is also the issue of finding aids. These should be rewritten as required to avoid offensive language, unless the language is required to understand the context or use the records>> And this has two aspects (at least)

- how we shape our own descriptive language and
- how we represent the assets in our descriptions.

A good example is records dealing with "insanity" in the 19th century when there were technically defined terms under statute that appear on the face of records we may now have to describe (e.g. "[idiot](#)". "[moron](#)", "[imbecile](#)", etc.). These were not synonyms but terms used to categorise people and differentiate them. They can't casually be replaced by a more acceptable term or suite of terms. Nowadays, the language of "[disability](#)" (itself a contested term for some) is the subject of much discourse, but when dealing with such records in an historical context, substituting [acceptable terms](#) for the offensive authentic language of the records themselves can, as Andrew suggests, baffle understanding and actually mislead users who are aware of the contemporary usage and frame their searches accordingly.

Other areas of contention might include -

- [migration](#) records (what to do about records dealing with "economic refugees" if that term is now deemed offensive),
- records identifying [gypsies](#) and other [Untermensch](#) as [Holocaust victims](#),
- the entire language of "[perversion](#)" (to say nothing of the history of the concept),
- the [language of gender](#), of course, as well as [gender wars](#), and
- as we are now seeing, the [language of race](#).

Archival description has an international audience, so we must also consider (in glossaries and ontologies, for example) whether a term regarded as inoffensive (in English, for example) is offensive in another language (French, for example). These have been referred to as "[false friends](#)". This is to say

nothing of the [problem](#) identified by some that the choice of language, accent, and dialect itself can (vocabulary apart) also be discriminatory. Can of worms, Michael.

2020, July 4: <<[David Povey](#): George Orwell was prescient when he wrote, 'Do you realize,' Winston says to his girlfriend, Julia, 'that the past... has been actually abolished?... Every record has been destroyed... every book has been rewritten, every picture has been re-painted, every statue and street and building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And that process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped.' We are witnesses to this process. Whether we participate in it or choose to defend the archives - the moral defence of the record - will change the way the past is viewed. But don't expect it to be easy. The first sheep has to be led to the butcher's knife, but the rest come meekly.>>

2020, July 4: <<[Andrew Waugh](#): I'm curious, David, as to what you are witnessing that leads you to think that we're on the way to this particular aspect of Orwell's 1984.>> The King Leopold Ranges in WA are to be [renamed](#). But what do we know today about the darkness that lay at the heart of Leopold's Congo enterprise that hasn't been known for decades? All that has changed is that the excitement arising from the recent upsurge of anti-racism has led to change. The Africa Museum responded years ago to the publication of an expose of the Belgian horrors. Why didn't WA do the same after publication of [King Leopold's Ghost](#) by [Adam Hochschild](#)? The answer must surely be that revisionism is not simply about correcting the past, it also about reshaping the present.

We cannot be detached from our own cultural context. The issue for us, then, is how far our participation in reshaping the present should guide our curatorial activities (if at all)? I would not expect the records themselves to be the objects of fury or that we will be asked to tamper with them on ideological grounds although we have seen examples where the very existence of toxic assets has been objected to. At the very least, their presentation, use, and display have been questioned (along with disagreeable language used to describe them when they come up for sale). In this country, however, records have been of fundamental importance in re-evaluating past activities: [Stolen Generations](#), [Child Migration](#), [Maralinga](#). And their importance as evidence in such matters is, I believe, generally understood.

It is far more likely that our presentation of them could come under attack (let's call that "description" even though we know description involves so much more). Our institutions have (rightly) responded to such emotive demands for reconsideration. Indeed, as Mark Brogan has pointed out in another thread, we have been pro-active and developed protocols for dealing with sensitive assets. But those protocols may not be satisfactory in the view of all those who might challenge our behaviours. Nor should they be. Our actions are impeachable like anyone else's.

But what if we can't accommodate demands on how we "describe" the records? Some of those involved in the Stolen Generations (people who fostered stolen children) are still alive - or were until recently. They've been interviewed on TV and seemed bewildered, believing they had been doing the right thing for the benefit of those they cared for. They were manifestly good, well-meaning people. But some would want us to portray them as (perhaps unconsciously) racist. How do we react? Do we condemn the well-meaning racists or understand them? Forgive them even?

The Africa Museum was set up to celebrate the benefits of Belgian colonialism. I doubt that revisionism has entirely replaced that view with a wholesale and unrelieved condemnation of the entire enterprise. Rightly or wrongly, the custodian is likely to reach a position that will not always be compatible with all of ideology's demands. It's like the old joke about the man whose doctor tells him he's going ga-ga. The man wants a second opinion. "OK," the doctor says, "you're also ugly." Of course, the doctor is wrong: one is a conclusion and the other is an opinion.

It will, in any case, be impossible for us to meet all the ideological demands because they will not be homogeneous (dissent among the dissenters). We cannot, or should not, expect that our professional conclusions in any situation will be entirely on point with the views of involved parties. The rationale for parallel provenance is that we stand outside disparate perspectives so as to contain them within a single

description. In principle and for practical reasons, therefore, we must form views of our own and, if necessary, defend them when challenged.

2020, July 7: <<[Andrew Waugh](#): But are you arguing that descriptions shouldn't be changed because we've historically favoured one group, and an innocent subset of that group *might* be upset if we now change?>> No, that is the opposite of what I have been consistently advocating and I've been expressing myself very badly if you can suppose that. The idea that we should uphold a "favoured" group of any kind is abhorrent to my way of thinking, I don't want to favour any views including those of the insurgency.

In struggling to find the truth of what we are trying to portray, descriptions will need to be changed and updated all the time – especially if they are found to have historically favoured one group or another. But that dictum applies equally to forbid us from favouring now "those who have mustered enough social support to make their desire visible". What this discussion is (or should be) about is why we make changes.

I've been upsetting people all my life and I don't intend to stop any time soon. I'm the last person, therefore, to argue that our descriptions shouldn't upset people. On the contrary, I think we have a duty to "describe" fearlessly and to lay out our professional conclusions regardless of the opinions of vested interests - upsetting, if necessary, both the "historically favoured" and "those wanting to change the story".

It would, of course, be naïve to ignore the current social context and (to revert to Michael's original post) recklessly inflame the battles over language. It does no good to flout the vested interests more than need be but we don't subscribe to them either.

<<"[The underlying evidence - such as was captured at the time and is left today - is unchanged.](#)"

Unchanged? Are you sure?>> It has been argued that the record is not simply an artefact frozen in time and place. It is "[always becoming](#)".

Sue McKemmish has noted that "the record is always in the process of becoming", as it moves through time and space developing new contextual and documentary relationships. Recordkeeping professionals, whether practitioners or theorists, "need to ensure our frameworks and systems preserve and make accessible accurate, complete, reliable and authentic records and archives" (McKemmish 2005), and to do this, we need to understand and reflect the complex contexts in which they exist.

My take on this, because I'm the descriptionguy after all, is that one way this happens is through "description". Archivists are recordkeepers because they continue the process of "creation" within the continuum. Records-making and records-keeping are not successive stages in a life cycle. In the old books, descriptions were representations of what is before us – like an artist painting on canvass a physical object before the eye. But records are not like that at all because they are forever moving "through time and space developing new contextual and documentary relationships". Documenting those relationships is what we do.

Description is part of the record, not something ancillary to it. The meaning of the record (our understanding of it), depends - from the instant of its creation onwards - on how it is understood. That understanding cannot come solely from an examination of its contents. It comes, as we well know, from context. And if this whole discussion demonstrates anything, it is that context is an evolving thing – not a process of struggle to displace an "historical" view in favour of a contemporary one, but a process of adjustment and enhancement.

This is my take on it, not necessarily that of Sue or Michael or of others who have written more about this than I have or ever will.

2020, July 11: <<[Andrew Waugh](#):,,, I quite deliberately, in this context, did not use the word record, but underlying evidence ... Whatever the record becomes over time ... the original information is retained unaltered. Further actions on the record can occur and we can accrete new understandings, new contexts, new relationships, and new descriptions around the original, but we can always, in theory, go back to what was created.>>

2020, July 11: I can understand a distinction being made between the “record” and the “evidence”. In my world, a record documents event or circumstance, evidence for which can exist outside a record. A record of event or circumstance is a particular kind of evidence with which recordkeepers deal. Recordkeeping begins with the formation of the record and its passage into archival storage is all but irrelevant. The evidential value of a record that hasn’t made it into archival storage is essentially no different to one that has. Archival storage is simply one way, not even an essential one, of keeping a record. Unless your idea of archiving extends to all aspects of retention (including those which are not deliberate) and that is a whole other discussion.

Information also comes in many forms – sometimes in the form of a record. I can’t see what is meant by “original information”. If Donald Trump says one thing and Dr Fauci says another I will wait for *Dr Fauci - The Musical* to know which is true but until then they’re just two pieces of contradictory information (originality doesn’t come into it). Don’t get me started on photographic “evidence”.

<<Where an archivist is documenting the context, or creating new relationships, or describing the records, they are acting as a historian (writing administrative history), and the result can always be subject to revision.>> Knowledge of context and relationships (for which I earlier used “description” as a short-hand term and for which, to avoid further confusion, I am happy now to substitute “KOCAR”) is not an historical account of the event(s) or circumstance(s) documented. KOCAR exists at the moment of formation and persists (or not) thereafter. KOCAR may be written down or it may subsist only in the mind of the recordkeeper (the living finding aid) or in some combination of the two. Retaining a memory of KOCAR is necessary if the record is to survive. KOCAR includes, of course, the “history” of the management of the record over time. When archivists capture KOCAR they are being recordkeepers, not historians.

The recordkeeper knows that KOCAR is no less inviolate than “what was created”. The historian does not. For me, this discussion is about the limits on our handling of KOCAR that prevent us from becoming historians (or, depending on your temperament, that save us from that fate). Our understanding of KOCAR, just like our understanding of “what was created” is usually imperfect and contested just like our understanding of the role of the archivist (as this thread is demonstrating)-

When asked what future historians would say were the causes of WW1, Clemenceau famously [replied](#) “... they will not say Belgium invaded Germany.” This was his belligerent response to a truculent question from a German representative implying that attribution of [war-guilt](#) to Germany alone in Art.231 of the [Treaty of Versailles](#) (ignoring Serbian provocation, Russian mobilisation, and Austrian aggression to name but some of the other factors) was wrong - which, of course, it was.

2020, July 11: **<<Michael Piggott:...“The National Archives of Australia is currently reviewing the principles that guide the selection of records and information”. Data is there too, mostly as “datasets”; and indeed “archives” ... Since Geoffrey Yeo's text [Records, Information and Data](#) there really is no excuse for passing one off as the other or another ... I assume NAA (and many other government records agencies) knows the differences but deliberately fudges them for messaging purposes>>**

2020, July 12: The distinction between record and information (and evidence too, for that matter) is well demonstrated in discussions about the “pre-industrial baseline”. This concept is fundamental in studying climate change which is measured (in part) by tracking temperature changes and their effects. But “change” only makes sense if we have a starting point from which to measure it. And there appears to be no agreement on what the baseline is or should be, how it should be calculated and proven, or what the length of the pre-industrial period should be. What data we have is unevenly spread geographically and over time and it becomes necessary to allow for anomalies such as solar activity, changes in the earth’s orbit, [The Little Ice Age](#), and unusual volcanic activity.

The choice of 1850–1900 as the historical reference period benefits from relatively widespread, but still sparse, temperature observations, and quantified uncertainties in the estimates of global temperature ... sparse observation-based datasets may have significantly underestimated the changes in global surface air temperature due to slower warming regions being preferentially sampled in the past. However, infilling the gaps in the early period is especially problematic owing to the sparse observations and may accentuate the dominant observed anomaly.

A 2017 research article by Ed Hawkins et al in [BAMS](#) published by the American Meteorological Society, while not providing definitive answers, has some helpful clues to sorting out our own thoughts

- There is no uniform historical record. The further back you go the sparser it becomes. There is still a lot of work to be done to trawl through available records that are not yet in a fit state to be useful – “Recovery of additional instrumental observations of temperature and sea level pressure from undigitized handwritten logbooks from ships and in currently data-sparse regions could significantly aid similar future assessments”.
- The raw observations (whatever the source) have to be assembled into data sets and these are then modelled using several different techniques so the results can be correlated to give greater confidence. A nice illustration of the distinction between the record and uses made of it. Data from the documentary record can also be used to validate modelling based on other sources.
- Another correlation can be made with “proxy evidence” (tree rings, ice cores, fossil pollen, ocean sediments, corals) – sometimes referred to as the “natural archives”. Interestingly, some definitions of proxy evidence include “historical data” to distinguish that from meteorological observations.

2020, August 22: What a difference ... (6) Remembering – what is “in scope”?

Whaling, windfalls, and women:

Historian Anna Claydon was wading through the Southern Hemisphere's [biggest collection of whaling logbooks](#) when she found a little girl's handwriting in the 1850s log of the whaling vessel Nimrod. It caught her attention ... "I had found this little girl's handwriting in the logbook and it was an immediate mystery," she said. "It looked as though there was this child sitting in the captain's cabin and doing her homework in his logbook, and that's what started this mad chase for the little girl." Dr Claydon then found Esther's birth record — but she was born six years after the voyages on the Nimrod were recorded in the logbook. It turned out that little Esther had been writing in the logbook while living in an intergenerational house with her grandmother, mother and her aunt, Charlotte — who had married Captain Jacobs.

"It was at this point I started to feel my way through all these relationships that were being bundled up together, and that fractured into a few different stories," she said ... it seems that [Esther] often received punishment in the form of writing lines ... "Her education seems to be a combination of memorising street ballads, memorising some rather naughty limericks, learning geography, and going to Sunday school," Dr Claydon said ... Esther's father had become a pauper, residing in the Brookfields Invalid Depot, on the site of what is now the North Hobart football oval, and her mother was [a nurse or midwife at the notorious Cascade Female Factory](#).

While Esther is only visible to us from a few lines she wrote in a logbook when she was five, more of her family's story was recorded when her parents had a very public spat in the letters of the newspaper, with her father demanding that the wife he deserted support him financially. In 1880, when Esther was 20, she married a prominent young chemist called Harry Lithgow and moved to Launceston, where the couple had three children: Vera, Harry and Vincent ... "I think the thing that is so compelling to me is the hidden history of Hobart in the late 19th century," Dr Claydon said. "It is one that comes about because of somebody preserving what they think is a different hidden history. "These are whaling logs but what spills out is a story of women ...

2020, August 23: <<Andrew Waugh:...It's largely forgotten now, but in 19th century British law (and consequently in the colonies) wives were considered legally indivisible from their husbands. The property of the marriage was the husband's to do with as he wished, as were the children...If the going got tough the husband could quite happily desert the wife leaving her to support herself and the children...The catch was that, because the women were still married, the absconding husband could turn up at any time and demand 'his' assets and the business that the wife had created. Why couldn't she divorce him? Ahh, because while the law allowed the husband to divorce his wife if she deserted him, she could not divorce him if he deserted her...NSW made the first attempt to resolve this problem by amending the marriage act to allow women to divorce their husbands on the grounds of desertion. Although passed by the NSW parliament, the Governor refused his assent on the grounds that it was important that marriage be uniform across the British empire...Nothing to do with archives, except, perhaps, as an example of how easily we forget the past.

2020, August 24: I would say it has everything to do with archives because it is well also to avoid remembering the past solely through the prism of today's values and it is archives that enable us to do that. Without wishing to inflame the list, it is possible to reflect that both [coverture](#) (the doctrine referred to by Andrew) and the related notion of [dowry](#), both of which had evolved into something rather horrible by the 19th century, had complex and not wholly unworthy origins in medieval Europe. A lot of it had to do with the inheritance of property - surprise, surprise – as well as power relationships between the sexes.

The Church fought for nearly 1000 years to establish the idea of marriage as both a religious and a social good. In its purest form, dowry was a process whereby daughters, upon marriage, took their share of parental property into the new family unit that was being formed (or enlarged). The sons had to wait for the parents to die to get their share but, upon marriage, a son (especially an eldest son) might bring part of his parents' wealth into the marriage. More usually, however, the newly joined husband/wife adhered to and lived within the husband's (now enlarged) family unit until his parents died and there was a new share out. Amongst the nobility, it was all about how best to preserve estates (domains).

If the marriage dissolved (e.g. by death), complicated laws of inheritance had to decide who got what. The widow might be able to take the dowry, or part of it, with her into a new marriage but any children of her first marriage might also have claims. Since property was involved, theory soon degenerated into greed and distortion of principles that were fairly abstruse to begin with. Daughters, especially amongst the nobility where vast estates were in play, didn't necessarily lose their property rights in the event of widowhood (especially if she and her husband remained childless). Medieval English history is replete with women bringing titles and estates into unions with second, third, and even fourth or fifth husbands when there was no heir. But a key question remained: who got it in the long run? Rather than a simple formulation that the wife lost her rights to the husband, coverture was partly about the management of the combined property for the duration of the marriage and its distribution in the event of contingent circumstances.

Both principles, it has been argued, were about protecting the woman's (property) rights within marriage as well as subjugating her. But the principle, as Andrew explains, had certainly become debased by the time of which he writes. Even in its origins, it wasn't all that high-minded. In her Introduction to [Georges Duby's *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: the Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*](#) (mine is the 1984 translation), Natalie Zemon Davis writes –

... he places aristocratic marriage within a system fraught with conflicts – between pope and king and priest and seignior in the first instance, but also between young men and old men, married priests and celibate priests, disaffected heretics and the evil world, and finally between men and women ... Duby suggests that [by the 13th century] the construction of a marriage system and a sexual economy was connected with the construction of political and ecclesiastical systems and an economy of feudal property ... Georges Duby gives to medieval marriage not only its complex system and historical dynamic – but also both its sexes.

Look [elsewhere](#) for another view of Duby's work.

2020, September 25: <<[Michael Piggott](#): Chris' reference to "Adjusting Australian history to take account of the Aboriginal experience is not about subscribing to an alternative worldview (though it may be prompted by that)" is worth serious thought. The inextricable link between place and Indigenous memory systems is now widely accepted. Thus in a [recent issue of Archival Science](#), referencing Kirsten Thorpe's research, Sue McKemmish and seven co-authors point to:

"the central role of Country in the management of records and stories, including the relationships between place, land, and people in Indigenous archiving", and again "Recordkeeping traditions in Indigenous Australia are many, many thousands of years old and take many forms, including records embodied in people or contained within Country. They are "living archives" transmitted and accessed through storytelling and performance using speech, dance, art, music, and song (for example, the songlines in which a wealth of Indigenous knowledge is embedded in Country-centric ribbons of song, narrative, and performance ...; rock paintings and carvings; markings on message sticks; and in Southeast Australia stories and maps of Country and the identity of the wearer etched into the linings of possum skin cloaks ...".

I suspect most archivists pay this thinking mere lip service. If we truly agree, however, what are the implications, the logical next steps, the alternative world views which needs embracing? Via the [Tandanya](#)

Declaration we are urged to see principles practices and mindsets with a view to "decolonisation". What else? A concrete issue: how should we as *archivists* and indeed the Australian Society of Archivists regard the destruction by Rio Tinto earlier this year of 40,000+ year old Aboriginal rock shelters in the Juukan Gorge, Western Pilbara, Western Australia? We are rightly concerned at the urgency of preserving nitrate film and magnetic audio tapes, and threats to state records offices and legislation. We would be concerned too if a mining company wanted to destroy part of the National Archives. So what about hugely significant Indigenous cultural sites? Not "in scope"??? >>

How do we decide what is "in scope"? In my view (not shared by all) we follow the evidence and not a theory in order to get there. Above all, we archivists locate truth in particularities not in generalities, truths that are derived from observation rather than idealisation. We follow the compass and not the map. And then, in ways mysterious and wondrous to behold, the particularity - when properly contextualised - reaches out into a richer and broader understanding of reality than can ever be obtained by adhering to a line of interpretation derived from ideological preconceptions.

I first learned that *Benito Cereno* was based on actual events when I assigned the novella for a seminar I taught on American Exceptionalism. That class explored the ways an idea usually thought of exclusively in terms of the United States - that America had a providential mission, a manifest destiny, to lead humanity to a new dawn - was actually held by all the New World republics. I began to research the history behind *Benito Cereno*, thinking that a book that focused narrowly on the rebellion and ruse could nicely illustrate the role slavery played in such self-understandings. But the more I tried to figure out what happened on board the *Tryal*, and the more I tried to uncover the motives of those involved ... the more convinced I became that it would be impossible to tell the story - or, rather, impossible to convey the meaning of the story - without presenting its larger context. I kept getting pulled further afield, into realms of human activity and belief not immediately associated with slavery, into, for instance, piracy, sealing, and Islam. That's the thing about American slavery; it never was just about slavery ... The different routes that led all those involved in the drama to the Pacific reveal the fullness of the paradox of freedom and slavery in America, so pervasive it could trap not just slaves and slavers but men who thought they were neither.

Greg Grandin [The Empire of Necessity](#)

2020, 15 November: What a difference ... (7) Conflicted memories

Whereas Remembrance Day in Britain prompts a united sense of national pride in military service, and respect for the sacrifices of those who fought in both world wars, [Germany's commemoration](#) of the war dead is much more cautious and complex. Military service in 20th Century Germany is associated with profound shame - focused above all on the victims of Nazi military aggression and the Holocaust. Reinforcing that is a belief that the ground for Germany's Nazi catastrophe was laid by the militarism of the Prussian state that unified the country in the 19th Century and led it into World War One. It was this militaristic state that built the Neue Wache or "new guardhouse", a classical building on the famous central Berlin street of Unter den Linden, which is now at the heart of the annual day of mourning.

Built in 1818, it was originally intended to celebrate the success of war in building national identity by liberating Germany from Napoleonic rule. And later military triumphs - especially over France in 1871 - were crucial landmarks as Prussia and Germany became a great European power ... An annual day of national mourning - the Volkstrauertag - was first held in the 1920s. And there was discussion about creating a place of national memory similar to the Cenotaph in London. But the re-opening of the Neue Wache as a "Memorial Site for the Fallen of the World War" in 1931 revealed sharp divisions within German society ... After the Nazis took power in 1933 they replaced the day of mourning with a day of commemoration of heroes, the Heldengedenktag. The Neue Wache was now used for their glorification of war - an echo of Prussian militarism in a new fascist style.

Twelve years later ... with the Neue Wache now located in Soviet-occupied Germany ... it was described as a memorial to the "victims of fascism" ... After the GDR collapsed in 1989 and Germany reunified, the Neue Wache was changed once again, finally taking on the form and purpose that it has today. This time the focus was on a sculpture from the 1930s by the artist Käthe Kollwitz installed in one of the building's chambers, depicting a woman holding a dead child. Her sculpture was seen as finally turning attention away from military memory towards all the victims of war and tyranny ... Kollwitz's sculpture is meant to represent not only a mother's grief at the loss of her soldier son but also all those non-soldiers caught up in the horrors

of war - especially Holocaust victims but also less well-known sufferers, such as the German women [who suffered mass sexual violence at the end of WW2](#).

Modern debate about the Neue Wache has also involved another question - whether as part of the restoration of Berlin's Prussia-era architecture, its statues of famous generals should be restored to their original positions in or near the building. And that is part of a larger problem. Where does modern emphasis on remembering the victims of war leave the memory and reputation of those who served in the German armed forces?

... Remembering soldiers lost in WW2 has been especially sensitive ... These lost soldiers could not be commemorated in public as heroes, as the German military were more and more associated with the brutal conquests and war crimes committed by the Nazi regime ... It was widely claimed that Nazi war crimes had been committed by the SS and other elite units, while the mainstream Wehrmacht army had - like most of the German population - remained ignorant of and uninvolved in the Holocaust ... But then a 1990s travelling exhibition called The Crimes of the Wehrmacht showed how the army had often been complicit in atrocities. This challenged the myth of the "clean Wehrmacht" ... Today's Germany has tiptoed only very slowly towards becoming a more "normal" military power, with the Bundeswehr deployed abroad ...

The charity responsible for German war graves, the Volksbund, founded in 1919, still organises many of Germany's commemorations of the war dead including the national day of mourning. Since the end of the Cold War its work has also included the highly sensitive task of recovering soldiers' remains and maintaining German military cemeteries in parts of Central and Eastern Europe where the most terrible Nazi crimes were committed. The Volksbund stresses what it sees as its educational role ... Individual grief at the loss of family members, including millions of soldiers, is real enough. But the memory of the vast numbers of other victims of Germany's wars will always be present too.

PS. And here in Australia, there is conflict of sorts over whether or not AWM should do something about "frontier wars". The [official position appears to be](#) "As defined in the Australian War Memorial Act 1980, the Memorial's official role is to develop a memorial for Australians who have died on, or as a result of, active service, or as a result of any war or warlike operation in which Australians have been on active service. The definition does not include internal conflicts between the Indigenous populations and the colonial powers of the day."

<<[Alan Ventress](#): I thoroughly agree with this analysis of conflicted memories. Cautious and complex sums it up. I lived in Hameln an der Weser for 3 years between 1968 and 1971 as part of the British Army's contribution to NATO ... What memorials there were to the fallen were subdued and almost hidden from view. I particularly recall one such memorial on a hill overlooking the town commemorating 3 soldiers who died, i quote, for the whole of Germany in April 1945. Another memorial at a mass grave for slave labourers on the outskirts of the town was unknown to the locals and many did not want to know about the sins of the Nazis ...>>

<<[Andrew Waugh](#):

The definition does not include internal conflicts between the Indigenous populations and the colonial powers of the day."

Semantic nonsense, of course. If they wanted to they could just as easily argue that this definition includes the deaths of indigenous people defending their country from invasion. I would assume, under this definition, the dead of the Boer war prior to federation are not memorialised in the AWM. They could not have been Australians as Australia did not exist...>>

<<[Joanna Sassoon](#): Never forget that Britain's role in shaping remembrance is also complex and cautious ... It was only in 2012 that the British erected a national memorial to those who served in Bomber Command and this was preceded by a long period of preferring to forget rather than choosing to remember. This official trying to forget continues with Bomber Command and other casualty records from WW2 remaining restricted, housed in the iron grip of the MoD although being transferred to the UK National Archives at a glacial pace after being vetted and currently inaccessible even for children of the deceased. MoD will give you information but not copies of the records but we all know the difference in knowing some of the story in a record vs seeing the record itself. This is in contrast to Australia's view on access to WW2 records and the millions currently being spent digitising them and making them freely available unless of course a family objects to the content and it then is rapidly taken down ...>>

...a memorial for Australians who have died on, or as a result of, active service...

I assume the 1980 Act makes statutory provision for defining "Australians" for the purpose of memorialisation, but until 1948 (at least) such a concept was itself cautious and conflicted in such a way that soldiers from Australia actually fought during the two world wars as British subjects. According to [Wikipedia](#) –

Until the passing in Australia of the *Nationality Act 1920*,^[9] Australia's nationality law, like that of other [Commonwealth countries](#), was governed by the English common law concept of a [British subject](#) ... The idea that there was such a thing as an Australian legal nationality, as distinct from a British one, was considered by the High Court of Australia in 1906 to be a "novel idea" to which it was "not disposed to give any countenance".^[10] That was as a matter of law, but in 1913 and 1930 Australian journalists considered that there were such things as Australian nationality and citizenship.^{[5][6]} The [British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act 1914](#), an act of the Westminster parliament, codified the common law rules. Australia followed this with the enacting of the *Nationality Act 1920*,^[9] which came into effect on 1 January 1921 and codified the concept of a British subject in Australia. In general, the principles of the 1920 Act and subsequent amendments followed United Kingdom legislation, although there were some differences that could lead to a person being a *British subject* solely under Australian law. The 1948 [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting](#) decided ... that the United Kingdom and the self-governing dominions would each adopt a separate national citizenship, while retaining the common status of British subject ...

Of course, Aborigines (and Torres Strait Islanders) didn't become Australian citizens until after the 1967 Referendum. Whether or not they were "Australians" before that is a more vexed question. But I think I am correct that Aboriginal soldiers served in both World Wars.

The British [memory of the terror bombing](#) of Germany in WW2, referred to by Joanna, is a superb example of conflicted memory. American recollections do not (apparently) travel in parallel - possibly revealing cultural differences. Some Americans are more ambivalent, however, over use of the A Bomb. The picture is further complicated by the participation of significant numbers of Canadians, Australians, and New Zealanders in the British bombing offensive. So, this is our issue also.

Relative to most other European countries the United Kingdom enjoys a secure, positive memory of World War 2. At its simplest, the narrative goes: the Germans started it and the British, with their allies, won. However damaging to British relations with other European states since 1945, this account has proved remarkably durable. Not for the British the 'divided memory' of Italy or the Vichy syndrome of France or the 'historians' dispute' of Germany; Britain's dominant memories of World War 2 are unified, straightforward, and patriotic. Within this serene landscape, the combined bombing offensive against Germany, and specifically the part played by Bomber Command of the Royal Air Force (RAF), form an exception. Memories of Bomber Command are unusual in being both complex and volatile. They are complex because they concern inherently difficult questions – the effectiveness and the morality of strategic bombing in World War 2 – and because they have involved different 'levels' of memory – the official, the academic, the popular, the local – rather differently. A cohesive national myth of the bombing campaign, comparable (for example) to the British myth of the Blitz, the German bombing of British cities in 1940-1941, is impossible. Memories of the bombing offensive, moreover, are volatile because they have shown significant variance over time ...

The development of British memories of the bombing offensive since 1945 can be set roughly into three periods: relative quietism from the war until the early 1960s; two decades of scepticism from then until the early 1980s; and, since then, the slow growth of acceptance and memorialisation. However, these divisions are approximate and ragged, and, because memory operates at so many different levels, they are far from uniform ...

Official distance from the offensive is also reflected in policies of memorialisation. Battle of Britain Day, on 15 September, celebrates Fighter Command's achievement in blocking the Luftwaffe's offensive against the RAF; there is no Bomber Command equivalent. Public money financed neither the statue of Harris, unveiled in 1992, nor the Bomber Command memorial opened in Green Park, London twenty years later. Official reluctance to celebrate the bombing offensive may be explained by the distaste referred to by Frankland, and by the perceived need for good relations with the Federal Republic of Germany within the context of the Cold War and, from 1961, of Britain's rapprochement with Europe. Hostile reactions in Cologne and other German cities to the unveiling of the Harris statue suggested that despite the

involvement of the Royal Family in the opening ceremonies, governments had every reason to keep them at arm's length. 'Forgetting', the title of the final chapter of Patrick Bishop's popular history Bomber Boys, therefore appears accurate in relation to government. Not so in the culture of schoolboys. They were treated, in the comics of the postwar generation and in the cheap and accurate plastic kits on sale from the 1950s, to a continuous celebration of World War 2 in which the bombing war played a prominent part ...

The bombing war has remained the most contentious aspect of Britain's World War 2 record, but not because it was 'forgotten', an expression better reserved for much of the war in the Far East. It has been contentious above all because of the gulf between the exceptional courage of the young men who served in Bomber Command and the horror that they inflicted on the German civilian population. To celebrate the bravery of the aircrew is to belittle the suffering of the civilians who died; to state clearly that the bombing offensive violated the laws and norms by which civilised human beings wage war diminishes the courage of the aircrew. The extraordinary difficulty of straddling this gulf explains the unease even of some of the aircrew themselves. The difficulties are compounded, as Süß observes, if the international context is taken into account. Germans seeking to promote a sense of national victimhood have seized on the Official History and the more sceptical British accounts. And the efforts at reconciliation coming from British churches run the risk of establishing a moral equivalence between the two belligerents ...

2020, November 16: <<[Michael Piggott](#): Good point re American ambivalence Chris, an excellent instance being the [Enola Gay case](#) ... And there's much more to say about the War Memorial and 'frontier wars' commemoration, including the fundamental pre-requisite of Indigenous community consultation before the Memorial decides to reverse its current interpretation of its Act, but, for the moment, don't forget the [Aboriginal Memorial](#) at the National Gallery ...>>

2021, 12 February: What a difference ... (8) Healing memories

A [useful reflection](#) on the nature of the memory of colonialism. Positing that:

The complex events we recall and commemorate during this time are integral to the story that has shaped our nations, in all their diversity. They are, however, events to be remembered and understood, respecting the fact that different perspectives exist. In doing this, we can facilitate a more authentic interpretation ... This journey of ethical remembering [allows] us to examine the nature of commemoration itself and how it might unburden us of history's capacity to create obstacles to a better, shared future ... I have given the title [Machnamh 100](#) to a series of reflections which examine the period 1920-1923, including the war of independence, civil war and partition. "Machnamh" is an Irish word encompassing reflection, contemplation, meditation and thought ...

I love the phrase "history's capacity to create obstacles". The author (currently President of Eire and identified as the President of Ireland) argues:

In my work on commemoration, memory, forgetting and forgiving I have sought to establish a discourse characterised by what the Irish philosopher [Richard Kearney](#) calls "a hospitality of narratives", acknowledging that different, informed perspectives on the same events can and do exist. The acceptance of this fact can release us from the pressure of finding, or subscribing to, a singular unifying narrative of the past.

As ever, a reflective study (of the context of anything) spills over into ever-expanding vistas:

It may be fruitful to consider the relationship of what has been titled – and not without dissent – the "European Enlightenment" within the project of imperial expansion for an understanding of how the mask of modernity has been used for cultural suppression, economic exploitation, dispossession and domination ... Those on the receiving end of imperialist adventurism were denied cultural agency, assumed to be incapable of it, and responsible for violence towards the "modernising" forces directed at them ... What our current reflection consists of, I suggest, is not the offering of a set of competing rationalisations for different kinds of violence. Instead it is about understanding the contexts in which they occurred ...

Back in the 1970s while I was studying in London, it seemed (to my limited colonial understanding) that prospects for the reflective study of imperial history were promising and available sources plentiful. But, as the article points out, there is:

... a disinclination in both academic and journalistic accounts to critique empire and imperialism ... a reluctance in former imperial powers to engage now with their imperialist past and to examine that past with descendants of those previously colonised, many of whom still live with the complex legacies of that colonialism ...

In any case, the entire question of discovering and shaping a contextual understanding of the (re)sources to support such a study, other than those left by the imperialists themselves, remains open.

PS. Just finding the right word is, of course, part of the problem. This author describes the 1916-1921 period in Ireland as a "War of Independence" – not a term everyone would use. On my shelves, books about the 1642-1660 period in Britain and Ireland refer to it variously as "The Great Rebellion" (following Clarendon) or "The Great Civil War" (following Gardiner) and many of the lesser authors (who seldom use the word "Great") are confused about whether it was an English event, a British event, or a British/Irish event.

PPS. "Ireland" is the English language form of "Eire" (without the accents). It could be said to be proper usage in an English language newspaper if one disregards the many respectful uses of indigenous language by English speakers around the world (not least by Australians and New Zealanders).

2021, 22 February: and speaking of truth, statues, and such, consider these gems –

Gavrilo Princip ... Princip is portrayed in the history books of the various countries of former Yugoslavia either as a terrorist or as a rebel with a cause – reflecting contemporary divisions in a region still recovering from the more recent conflicts of the 1990s. While they were part of Yugoslavia, children in all these countries were taught the same history. Now they all have their own versions of the truth, shaped by the more recent wars, and are passing it on to the next generation ... In ethnically divided Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is [now] no commonly held view either about Princip or about the origins of the first world war ...

These divisions are also reflected in the rival commemorations that will be held in Bosnia. A series of events will be held in Sarajevo, including exhibitions, concerts and a meeting of young peace activists from around the world. Bosnian Serbs will hold their own events in the eastern town of Visegrad, organised by film director Emir Kusturica, while a statue of Princip is due to be erected in Serb-run eastern Sarajevo ...

Violet Gibson On 7 April 1926 an Irish woman stepped out from a crowd in Rome and fired a shot at one of the 20th century's most infamous dictators. One bullet grazed the nose of Benito Mussolini, but the Italian leader survived the assassination attempt Now, nearly a century later, moves to put up a plaque in Dublin are gathering pace After some time in an Italian prison, she was deported to England ... She was subsequently kept in St Andrew's Hospital, a mental asylum in Northampton, until her death in 1956. In the days following the attempted assassination, the President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State W.T. Cosgrave, wrote to Mussolini to congratulate him on his survival ...

Dublin City Council has now passed a motion which has given initial approval to put up a plaque dedicated to her in the city ... "It suited both the British authorities and her family to have her seen as 'insane' rather than as political," the motion [states]

"Stern Gang" Lehi ... was a Zionist paramilitary organization ... that used terrorist means in its actions. Its avowed aim was to evict the British authorities from Palestine by resort to force, allowing unrestricted immigration of Jews and the formation of a Jewish state, a "new totalitarian Hebrew republic" ... Lehi and the Irgun were jointly responsible for the massacre in Deir Yassin. Lehi assassinated Lord Moyne, British Minister Resident in the Middle East, and made many other attacks on the British in Palestine. On 29 May 1948, the government of Israel, having inducted its activist members into the Israel Defense Forces, formally disbanded Lehi, though some of its members carried out one more terrorist act, the assassination of Folke Bernadotte some months later ... After the assassination, the new Israeli government declared Lehi a terrorist organization, arresting some 200 members and convicting some of the leaders. Just before the first Israeli elections in January 1949, a general amnesty to Lehi members was granted by the government.

In 1980, Israel instituted a military decoration, an "award for activity in the struggle for the establishment of Israel", the Lehi ribbon. Former Lehi leader [Yitzhak Shamir](#) became Prime Minister of Israel in 1983.

[Ghengis Khan \(1\)](#) ... Genghis Khan had been revered for centuries by Mongols and certain other ethnic groups such as Turks ... In 1962, the erection of a monument at his birthplace and a conference held in commemoration of his 800th birthday led to criticism from the Soviet Union and the dismissal of secretary Tömör-Ochir of the ruling [Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party Central Committee](#). In the early 1990s, the memory of Genghis Khan underwent a powerful revival, partly in reaction to its suppression during the [Mongolian People's Republic](#) period ... In Mongolia today, Genghis Khan's name and likeness appear on products, streets, buildings, and other places. His face can be found on everyday commodities, from liquor bottles to candy, and on the largest denominations ... Major Genghis Khan statues stand before the parliament ... There have been repeated discussions about regulating the use of his name and image to avoid trivialization ... As of 2012, [Mongolian President] Elbegdorj issued a decree establishing Genghis Khan's birthday as a national holiday ... In Inner Mongolia there are a monument and buildings dedicated to him ...

The conquests and leadership of Genghis Khan included widespread devastation and mass murder, and he, along with the Mongols in general, perpetrated what has been called ethnocide and genocide ... Iranian historians from the time of Mongol occupation, describe the Mongol invasions as an catastrophe never before seen. A number of present-day Iranian historians ... have likewise viewed the period initiated by Genghis Khan as a uniquely catastrophic era. Steven R. Ward writes that the Mongol violence and depredations in the Iranian Plateau "killed up to three-fourths of the population... possibly 10 to 15 million people. Some historians have estimated that Iran's population did not again reach its pre-Mongol levels until the mid-20th century." ...!

cf. Alexander the Great, Atilla the Hun, Charlemagne, Tamerlane, Francisco Pizarro, Napoleon, Shaka, etc. – conquerors all.

[Ghengis Khan \(2\)](#) A French museum has postponed an exhibit about the Mongol emperor Genghis Khan citing interference by the Chinese government, which it accuses of trying to rewrite history The museum's director, Bertrand Guillet, said: "We made the decision to stop this production in the name of the human, scientific and ethical values that we defend." It said the Chinese authorities demanded that certain words, including "Genghis Khan," "Empire" and "Mongol" be taken out of the show. Subsequently they asked for power over exhibition brochures, legends and maps The museum branded it "censorship" and said it underlined a "hardening ... of the position of the Chinese government against the Mongolian minority" ...

2021, 23 February: [and on it goes](#)

Moscow will this week vote on whether to reinstate a statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet security services, on the spot from which it was torn down during the collapse of the USSR. The monument to Dzerzhinsky, an architect of the Bolsheviks' murderous Red Terror, dominated the square outside the headquarters of the Soviet KGB, now the FSB, in central Moscow until 1991. Crowds cheered as it was removed by cranes following a failed coup. Since then, the statue has been on display at an [outdoor "museum" of Soviet monuments](#), including busts of Lenin, Stalin and Brezhnev, in a park in the Russian capital.

But Moscow authorities announced they would reconsider the fate of the "Iron Felix" monument with an online vote ... Police meanwhile cleared [a memorial to opposition leader Boris Nemtsov](#) from a bridge where it has stood since his murder in 2015, reportedly over fears that supporters of Navalny could rally there. Eight people who had come to lay flowers there were arrested.

<<**[Michael Piggott: This widening survey is inching towards mention of a regime that, for example, knows exactly what to do with people taking an unhealthy interest in the, ahem, "June Fourth Incident" and how to correct museum labels and certainly knows how to encourage Chris back onto the right path for his unsound comment at the end of his last most interesting post, viz: "No doubt such musings would be seen as a veiled power play."...](#)**>> I'm unreconstructed. I know I'm unreconstructed. I mean to go on being unreconstructed. I like it.

The Dzerzhinsky affair provides another reason for not consigning disgraced statuary to museums. They might come back! Hadn't thought of that one. The Romans did it better, they had *Damnatio memoriae*.

2021, 24 February: [Things people say](#)

Australia's peak national library bodies want to see the federal government adopt a policy and strategy for combating misinformation and disinformation among individuals of all ages. The Australian Libraries and Information Association (ALIA), National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA) and National Archives of Australia all spoke of the looming threat of misinformation and information warfare the country was facing at a nationhood committee hearing on Friday morning. ALIA chief executive Sue McKerracher said access to the internet was crucial for the nation but so was a strategy to ensure Australians of all ages were able to read and interpret that information ...

"I'd like to see a recommendation that the federal government work with the Australian Media Literacy Alliance to develop a national policy strategy, a framework and action - a call to action - for media literacy." ... National Archives director-general David Fricker added that his agency, which collects and stores a number of critical government records, played an important role in stamping out misinformation by holding onto records that might otherwise be destroyed ... "Only the National Archives ... actually stops people, government officials, from destroying records and without that role, many records would be destroyed before they ever saw the light of day." ... Mr Fricker said those in Parliament could work to support government institutions and experts in order to ensure trust in facts wasn't being eroded ... "[A debate about] whether the Bureau of Meteorology, you know, can be trusted or not, is running at the moment. And I think, I think there is a role for Parliament and a role for government to actually be a bit more supportive of institutions."

Liberal senator and committee chairwoman Amanda Stoker pushed back on Mr Fricker's assertion, stating uncritical acceptance of experts in government institutions wasn't the solution either. "There's something compelling about the alternate argument that says we can't have uncritical acceptance of everything that comes from experts in a government department, simply because that's the title they hold," Senator Stoker said. "There's a balancing exercise."

Senator Stoker asked Ms McKerracher what sort of approach would be needed to tackle misinformation if it were to be adopted as a policy. There were already a number of literacy and educational programs the libraries had in place, such as the Be Connected and Tech Savvy Seniors programs, Ms McKerracher said, but what was missing was a co-ordinated, federal approach ... "What we're looking for is a national kind of guidance for this that then can be divided up between states and territories, but it has that linked, connected ... not people duplicating, overlapping, arguing about the right way to do it. "A real national approach to this."

I hadn't realised that what was missing was a co-ordinated federal approach, that governments are motivated by tolerance and the search for Truth, or that they practice what they preach. As to the [June Fourth incident](#) -

tolerance of injustice and distorted information is an act of encouragement and complicity. Such tolerance allows authoritarian regimes to transgress any red lines. This is exactly what happened after "June Fourth", when the west bought into the excuse that Chinese society would become more democratic after it became richer.

Tolerance and understanding live at the personal level and inform society's values. God forbid that either are ever shaped by the hand of governments. It has to be the other way around. Good governments arise (if at all) from the shared values of their citizens and of the society they govern. Totalitarians believe otherwise. Education to encourage critical thinking (rather than media literacy) – ensuring "Australians of all ages were able to read and interpret ... information" – yes, that I can see might be helpful. But when has our teaching ever been about critical thinking and when would parents and ideologues ever permit it to be? And how likely is it that the downtrodden, dispossessed followers of populist demagoguery or the critical theory activists inspired by their mission to change the world would take any notice?

2021, 26 February:

The Australian Libraries and Information Association (ALIA), National and State Libraries Australia (NSLA) and National Archives of Australia all spoke of the looming threat of misinformation and information

warfare...access to the internet was crucial for the nation but so was a strategy to ensure Australians of all ages were able to read and interpret that information ...

But what sort of strategy? The State cannot stymie the evil of misinformation and it cannot establish a Ministry of Truth. Information warfare can only be won by boots on the ground in the culture wars. People, not Policy. Culture cannot be planned "because it is also the unconscious background of all planning" (T S Eliot). But I agree that the State can help People to get on their feet ("to read and interpret") - without having control over where that will lead. A bureaucrat's nightmare. And "uncritical acceptance of experts in government institutions" wouldn't be any part of that (where did Senator Stoker get that idea?)

If I ruled the world, [critical thinking](#) would, as I've said before, be central to education – not what to think, but how to think. There are [plenty of courses](#) (some good, some lousy) set up to do this. But my starting point would be with language (I think Orwell and Don Watson would agree). Giving students permission to despise weasel words and phrases and the confidence to make judgements – just the mental organ (in the words of Kingsley Amis) that makes you say *This is bloody good* or *This is piss*.

In [The Dragons of Expectation](#), Robert Conquest gives some wonderful examples of the "stupefying" use of English, "grotesque vocabulary held together by a tangled syntax, if such it can be called" –

Untenable words taken from "a book about Byron by a Professor of English at a great university": *behaviourly, factive, reportorial, factiveness, attitudinal, suppositional, contextualized, interiorised, postcivilised, episodically, audience interiorized problem, postpubescent, postmythic, iconograph, variant phase.*

[I think I could forgive *contextualised* and *episodically*.]

Worthless word conglomerates identified by Clive James when "reviewing an otherwise deplorable book": *non-cognitive structural features, universalistic social psychological processes, a cognitive model of ontology, ideational formations.*

Esoteric language used in a book about Homer: *Developmentally the Achilles complex is like a running spiral arrested after its first circuit, where, having doubled back upon itself, it dissects itself at a point only slightly in advance of its origin, The Bride transmits her desire to the suitors through a triple network of 'ciphers' which are set in a nebulous cloud of 'blossoming', and which sort the alphabetic units emitted by a 'letterbox', [T]his chapter is devoted to the narrative situation of complex narrator-text or embedded, focalization, NF1 [F2Cx]. There is embedded (or secondary) focalization when the NF1 represents in the narrator-text the focalization of one of the characters.*

These examples are drawn from academic works. Open any newspaper or journal or turn on a radio or TV and enough vulgar instances of reported speech will be supplied to keep a critical thinking course going for many, many months.

Forgive my banging on about this. The COVID Experience is making me crazy. I'm thinking too much. Someone needs to tell me to shut up.

<<[Michael Piggott:...Triggered by Chris' ALIA/NSLA/NAA quotes from their evidence to the curious Senate's 2019 inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy, I decided to look at the submissions such bodies made to it. A couple of gems from the NSLA submission:](#)

- "As custodians of national, state and territory collections, our collection development policies are designed to address historical bias and to ensure that we continue to collect in a way that reflects population changes, including new migrant communities".

- "The ethos that drives NED and indeed all NSLA collecting activity is to represent Australia as we are, not as we might wish to be perceived. Our preparedness as a nation to collect and preserve the less palatable aspects of our history and culture is one of the clearest demonstrations of confidence in our national identity and in our democracy".

And in recent press commentary about the evidence given to the inquiry, this quote:

- "Only the National Archives ... actually stops people, government officials, from destroying records..."

ALIA and NSLA also like to quote surveys saying they are among the most trusted Australian institutions. So these statements must be correct, yes? Yet reading sentences like to three quoted, one wants to shout "Oh, really?? Are you sure??". They're not so much Robert Conquest's stupefying use of English as slippery plausible self-serving easily illustrated half-truths which will never be subjected to rigorous critical scrutiny.>> Developing bulls**t detection skills is, of course, the next stage in learning how to think critically.

2021, 27 February: I can't help myself-

To enlarge on Michael's theme (not suggesting he would agree with me on this) let us consider what the librarians and archivists might have said to the Senate's 2019 inquiry into nationhood, national identity, and democracy. We proclaim ourselves to be (inter alia) on the side of truth and open-ness. How if people like Sue McKerracher and David Fricker said that governments, in the service of democracy, should be less secretive and more truthful with people? How if they had supported the idea that the interests of the nation are advanced when folk can reach "evidence-based judgements on the world in which they live"? They couldn't say that to the people who employ them, of course. And there are nuanced arguments for upholding security. But there's nothing nuanced about avoiding the issue altogether on such a subject as that. Here is what a [journalist](#) might have said.

The 10-year campaign by the US [government](#) to criminalise reporting critical of its actions has failed in rather peculiar circumstances, with the unexpected decision by the court in London [to reject](#) the US demand for [Julian Assange's extradition](#) [now under appeal]. Judge Vanessa Baraitser gave as the reason for her decision Assange's mental health and possible suicide risk, not freedom of expression or evidence of a politically inspired persecution by the Trump administration ...

Had the US succeeded in extraditing Assange to face 17 charges under the Espionage Act of 1917, and one charge of computer-hacking, he could have been sentenced to 175 years in prison. His conviction would have had a devastating effect on freedom of the press, because what he was accused of doing is what every journalist and news outlet does or ought to do: find out significant information, which may or may not be labelled secret by self-interested governments, and pass it on to the public so they can reach evidence-based judgments on the world in which they live.

I followed the extradition hearings day-by-day last September, and there was nothing that Assange and WikiLeaks disclosed that I and any other decent reporter would not have revealed ... extracts from the US government files were published by *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* and *El Pais*. They were described as the greatest scoop of the century, akin to Daniel Ellsberg giving the Pentagon Papers to the press in 1971.

The most famous item was film taken by a US military helicopter in Baghdad in 2007 as it opened fire on a dozen Iraqi civilians, including two local journalists working for Reuters, killing them all. The Pentagon claimed that the targets were "terrorists" and had refused to release the video, despite a Freedom of Information Act request. I was in Baghdad at the time and the journalists there suspected what had really happened, but we could not prove it in the face of official denials.

It was the contents of the Apache helicopter video and thousands of other reports that so shocked a US military intelligence analyst called Bradley Manning, who later changed her name and legal gender to Chelsea Manning, that she handed the great cache of classified documents over to WikiLeaks. Despite claims to the contrary, the electronic files did not contain the deepest secrets of the US government, but they did reveal what it knew about its own activities and that of its allies. This was often deeply embarrassing and wholly contrary to what American governments had been saying to their own people and the world.

A US official explained to me at the time that the files – 251,287 diplomatic cables, over 400,000 classified reports from the Iraq War and 90,000 from the Afghan War – were filed on a system known as SiproNet (Secret Internet Protocol Router Network). This was designed to give wide access to useful information to hundreds of thousands of US government personnel. My diplomatic friend explained that with so many people able to read the files, the US government was not so naïve as to put its deepest secrets in it.

I was surprised 10 years ago by the outrage of the US and allied governments at the disclosures. An early claim that Assange and WikiLeaks had endangered the lives of US agents lost credibility when it was

revealed in 2013 that a task force of 120 counterintelligence officers had failed to find a single instance of anybody who had died because of the WikiLeaks disclosures. Nevertheless, this charge was brought up against Assange by the lawyers for the US government at the extradition hearings that began last September.

The anger of the American and allied governments had little to do with the precise level of secrecy of the files that were disclosed. Many of the facts were already known or suspected by journalists. But the keeping of secrets – and their disclosure by the authorities themselves in their own interests – is an instrument of power that those possessing it will fight hard not to lose. Hence the dogged determination with which Assange has been pursued ever since.

The campaign to discredit him had much success. The newspapers that once feted him as the source of their scoops swiftly distanced themselves from him and from WikiLeaks. This had much to do with his status as a rape suspect in Sweden, though these allegations had nothing to do with the extradition hearings. I have a sense that the mainline establishment newspapers that had published the files were taken aback and intimidated by the explosive reaction of the American governments and its allies.

The majority of these publications consequently ignored or played down the Assange extradition hearings. The challenge to the freedom of the press was self-evident, as was the danger to journalists truthfully reporting facts, any one of which might be deemed a secret by the US government. They too could have faced espionage charges on exactly the same basis as Assange.

Yet much of the media remained silent or made nit-picking attacks on Assange's personality, despite the seriousness of the case. The failure of the attempt to extradite Assange – if confirmed on appeal – gets them off the hook and they will no longer have to take a stand. This is one of the most worrying aspect of the case – the willingness of the media to stand to one side during one of the greatest attacks on press freedom in modern history.

It should be remembered that the prosecution of Assange was begun by Obama - a secrecy obsessive if ever there was one.

2021, 18 March: Another [example](#) of contested memory

A baleful silence attends one of the most talked-about figures in British history. You may enthuse endlessly about [Winston Churchill](#) "single-handedly" defeating Hitler. But mention his views on race or his colonial policies, and you'll be instantly drowned in ferocious and orchestrated vitriol ... Many people want to know more about the historical figures they are required to admire uncritically ... Yet providing a fuller picture is made difficult. Scholars who explore less illustrious sides of Churchill are treated dismissively ...

In response to calls for fuller information about its founder, [Churchill College, Cambridge] set up a series of events on [Churchill, Empire and Race](#)... Even before it took place, the discussion was repeatedly denounced in the tabloids and on social media as "idiotic", a "character assassination" aimed at "trashing" the great man. Outraged letters to the college said this was academic freedom gone too far, and that the event should be cancelled. The speakers and I, all scholars and people of colour, were subjected to vicious hate mail, racist slurs and threats. We were accused of treason and slander. One correspondent warned that my name was being forwarded to the commanding officer of an RAF base near my home.

The college is now under heavy pressure to stop doing these events. After the recent panel, the rightwing thinktank Policy Exchange, which is influential in government circles – and claims to champion free speech and controversial views on campus – published a "review" of the event. The foreword, written by Churchill's grandson [Nicholas Soames](#), stated that he hoped the review would "prevent such an intellectually dishonest event from being organised at Churchill College in the future – and, one might hope, elsewhere".

It's ironic. We're told by government and media that "cancel culture" is an imposition of the academic left. Yet here it is in reality, the actual "cancel culture" that prevents a truthful engagement with British history ... Critical assessment is not "character assassination". Thanks to the groupthink of "the cult of Churchill", the late prime minister has become a mythological figure rather than a historical one. To play down the implications of Churchill's views on race – or suggest absurdly, as Policy Exchange does, that his racist words meant "something other than their conventional definition" – speaks to me of a profound lack of honesty and courage ...

To say nothing of his notorious military misjudgements ("alleged" of course):

e.g. [Gallipoli](#), [Norway](#), [Greece](#). [Churchill said history would be kind to him because he intended to write it himself.] Why is it so difficult to look facts in the face, eschew black-or-white (hero-or-villain) interpretations, and make judgements free of emotional or ideological commitments. Because we're human, I suppose. But you don't have to deny that humanity if you seek, as Acton urged when he railed against dogma, to overcome it. And is it not becoming to simply shrug the shoulders and demolish the aspiration to be objective ([critical librarianship](#)) in order to the clear the way for dogmas of one's own,

PS. I see that populist responses to the report on war crimes in Afghanistan is now being framed (e.g. by Alan Jones et al) as supporting our veterans.

Purely by chance, I am (re)reading *1940: Year of Legend, Year of History* (1966) by [Laurence Thompson](#). Last night, as I nodded off, my eye fell on this passage dealing with Churchill's accession to the Prime Ministership:

For a moment it is possible to catch a glimpse of Churchill as he was on this day of assuming power, before the mists of legend engulf him along with Alfred who burnt the cakes but beat the Danes, Bruce and his unconquerable spider, all the other figures of a history blocked out for him in strong, certain masses of black and white in a way only possible to one almost totally immune from the disadvantages of education.

Hmmm. "...only possible to one almost totally immune from the disadvantages of education...". It may have been possible to write that in 1966 – not so sure about today.

2021, 29 March: What a difference ... (9) Prisoners of our own identity or critical thinkers?

Assertions that we are prisoners of our own identity and forbidden from comprehending any broader experience gives rise to the cultural crime of "[appropriation](#)", delegitimising and devaluing thought that belongs to someone else. It is represented as theft of an experience, an idea, or an understanding that is someone else's property by virtue of their birth or allegiance (a privilege conferred by race, gender, and even by character or personality).

... the writers' association [PEN](#) is being drawn into dispute over a declaration claiming the right of authors to imagination, allowing them to describe the world from the point of view of characters from other cultural backgrounds. At issue is a charter manifesto, [The Democracy of the Imagination](#), passed unanimously by delegates of PEN International at the 85th world congress in Manila in 2019. A year on ... PEN's US arm, PEN America, has not endorsed the manifesto, which includes the principle: "PEN believes the imagination allows writers and readers to transcend their own place in the world to include the ideas of others."

While welcoming the commitment to freedom of expression, officials at PEN America indicate that aspects of the declaration might be perceived as straying into the contentious territory of cultural appropriation ... While accusations of misrepresentation are often made in social justice activism, only rarely have they extended into the realm of the imagination ... The manifesto ... may only serve to establish that freedom of expression is an area of increasing dissension. In 2015, PEN America was met with dissent ... over its decision to give its Freedom of Expression Courage Award to Charlie Hebdo. More recently, members of PEN's LA arm staged a protest over an invitation to Julian Assange to speak on press freedoms.

According to Chiari Bottici, author of *Imaginal Politics: Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary* and professor of philosophy at the New School in New York, the manifesto is beset with problems. "Imagination is the faculty to imagine what is not there, to give us the capacity to put ourselves in other people's shoes, but it is also what enables us to lie, and even purports such massive collective lies such as racism, sexism, classism, and thus even fascism ... a lot of racialised and sexed people have been unable to inhabit 'their own space' because they have been overwhelmed by the ideas and worldview of others ..."

How horrible it is for someone to claim ownership over the space in which another thinks and feels, to privilege their own insights not by facts and argument but by claims to virtue based on birth and experience, what James Madison pejoratively called "[the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind](#)." It is one thing to argue, as did Madison, that thought is a person's "most sacred property" and to dispute strenuously with others you disagree with but just as personal liberty stops (as has been said) at the end of the other guy's nose, it must surely stop at the edge of another person's mind. It could be argued (probably has been) that archival description (and memory work more generally) involves an

imaginative understanding of the world and that this fight is ours also. But how much more is at stake for us in our endeavour to get at the facts and to wrestle with accuracy unencumbered by this sort of nonsense.

<<**Michael Piggott**: As for "cultural appropriation", one of the best local examples involved **Helen Dale**. It was a perfect storm culture wars controversy attracting terms like literary hoax, holocaust denial and ideological conformity. As for whether archivists and others in memory institutions need to be alert to the issue, I'm not sure, and probably like Chris hope - just for a change - others might post comments. Incidentally, the 1994 multi-award-winning book which started Dale's rise to fame/infamy, *The hand that signed the paper* which she published as Helen Demidenko, is **catalogued** by the NLA using this false name and Dewey numbers and subject terms assuming it to be fiction.>>

2021, 30 March: <<**Andrew Waugh**: ... Archivists ... are writing archival descriptions about records created by people who are just like them. In many cases this doesn't matter (describing railway records, for example). In other cases it may matter a lot.>> Quite so. When I am describing records of the Aboriginal protection system (including children being removed from their parents), I am indeed describing records created by people just like me. Well, maybe not just like me because the past is a foreign country. But such records are about people who are very much not like me. That's their parallel provenance. derived from those Aboriginal people who created the records in another sense (being parties to the activity which gave rise to their formation). That's why people (not just Aboriginal people) who are subject of the pressure of involvement with the records-maker (or who are descended from them or who identify in some other way) will tell you that such records are their records, part of their heritage.

How deficient would your description be if it reflected the purpose of the activity depicted in the records solely from the point of view of the government whose programme it was, taking at face value their rationale and justification at the time – since abandoned (and maybe apologised for at a later time). And wouldn't it be just as wrong to swallow uncritically their subsequent explanations and rationalisations (and, yes, their apologies too). And what about the voice of those good, well-meaning people who fostered the stolen children? You can see another point of view, a different experience, in the puzzled faces and pained tones when they are interviewed on TV and accused of cruelty. Who speaks for them?

Well, my answer (it will surprise no one to hear) is not us. It's not our job to take the point of view of anyone involved in the activity (governments, Aborigines, foster carers, activists, the children themselves or their families) but to depict it as accurately as we can.

People say to me that this is heartless, that we have a duty to empathise with injustice (in effect, to take sides). I think that is too heavy a burden for the humble descriptive archivist or maybe just something that interferes with our single-minded purpose to get at the truth and let others make their judgements based on our best endeavours to give them the means to do so. Let us be clear. This involves separating, so far as we can, our professional technique from our humanity. If we submit that technique to the claims of empathy, we sacrifice judgement for feeling.

From that perspective (and I know this view is not widely shared) it is not difficult to resist charges of appropriation since the basis for such charges is a false one – viz. that in order to get at the truth of something you have to be something you are not (and never can be). That the mind cannot comprehend someone else's experience is obvious enough. But why should their experience give rise to judgement that is any truer than mine? But the cancellation doctrine goes further than that, doesn't it? It denigrates and delegitimises my judgement in favour of that of someone else. And it does so, not on the basis that it is a better, truer, more accurate analysis, but because of who that person is. I think that deferring to someone else's judgment in those circumstances is demeaning to them and shameful to me.

2021, 31 March: <<Let us be clear. This involves separating, so far as we can, our professional technique from our humanity. If we submit that technique to the claims of empathy, we sacrifice judgement for feeling.>> Does this, then, mean there is no place in description (and memory work more generally) for morality and feeling? Of course not. How could anyone suppose that judgement can be devoid of either. That's not my point at all. I'm with Acton – judgement is the antithesis of "neutrality", analysis must reach

a conclusion. What is at issue here is how to make judgements, by whom they can be made. and the distinction between technique and values.

If I ruled the world, [critical thinking](#) would, as I've said before, be central to education – not what to think, but how to think. (26 Feb., 2021)

“Nerd immunity”

How many conspiracy theorists does it take to change a lightbulb? ... it takes only a dozen anti-vaxxers to spread dangerous misinformation to millions of people. According to a report from the NGO Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), up to 65% of anti-vaccine content on Facebook and Twitter can be traced back to [just 12 people](#). Although Facebook has disputed the report's methodology, the 12 have been nicknamed the “disinformation dozen”, and include Robert F Kennedy Jr, the nephew of John F Kennedy ... Free-speech issues aside, banning people from tech platforms is a game of whack-a-mole. As long as the incentive structures for spreading false information remain in place, more conspiracy theorists will pop up ... They have nifty ways to hijack your attention, but they can't wave a magic wand and force you to believe that Bill Gates engineered the pandemic so that he can implant trackable microchips in people ... Misinformation is never going to go away; it isn't just a Big Tech problem, it's an education problem. Instead of just yelling at tech companies, politicians should be focusing on what Taiwan's digital minister calls “[nerd immunity](#)” – the government should be investing in education so people have the skills to identify fake news.

Finland, which was rated Europe's most resistant nation to fake news last year, is [one model of how you do this](#). In 2014, after an increase in disinformation from Russia, the government embedded media literacy in the national curriculum. Starting in primary school, kids learn the critical thinking skills needed to parse the modern information ecosystem. Students learn how easy it is to manipulate statistics in their maths lessons, for example. They learn how to distinguish satire from conspiracy theories in their Finnish lessons. They look at how images can be used for propaganda in art class. And this sort of education isn't just given to children: Finnish civil servants, journalists and NGO workers are also trained in digital literacy skills ...

Banning a few anti-vaxxers from Facebook may have short-term benefits but if we want to build healthy societies in the long-term we have to prioritise education and develop nerd immunity.

2021, 31 March: <<[Mike Jones](#):...these issues are not just about the individual, or the right to imagine things about which one has no direct experience. It is about privilege and the functioning of power...>> We are [prisoners of identity until we transcend it](#) and we begin that journey with a proper understanding of difference.

The question of difference as it relates to the nature and implications of the historical encounter between Indic and Western cultural and intellectual traditions under the British Empire can be broadly approached in two ways: difference as identity and difference as thought. In the discourse of difference as identity, the notion of difference functions as the basis of cultural and national identity. In the discourse of difference as thought, on the other hand, difference functions as a marker of the nature and specificity of thought, its origin and historical significance. The crucial difference between the two approaches is that difference as thought goes beyond identity in its claim to universality and truth.

2021, 3 April: [Facts are stubborn things](#)

Is a transcendent reach beyond identity and towards independence of mind an abnegation of faith or is it rather a commitment to [universality and truth](#) that refuses to be shackled by “social context” (past or present)?

Rooting around the basement of my family home in Mannheim, south-west [Germany](#), some years ago, I discovered evidence that in 1938 my grandfather had taken advantage of antisemitic Nazi policies to buy a small business from a Jewish family at a low price ... After the war [a survivor from the family] wrote asking for reparations, but my grandfather refused to face up to his responsibilities.

I was shocked ... “I used to tell my father: what upsets me is not that you've done the Nazi salute ..., its's that even today you still don't recognise the atrocities of the Third Reich and your own responsibility.” Testimonies are less reliable than documents. They are filtered through experience and emotion, sadness and anger, but also love and loyalty. I had to confront them with historical facts. How far was it possible not to be a Nazi under the Third Reich? ... If conceiving of Auschwitz was difficult, it was still impossible to have “seen nothing, heard nothing” ... I also took into account the psychosocial mechanisms that form social and

individual attitudes: conformism to moral standards, fear, opportunism, as well as political and ideological manipulation ...

Eventually I came to the conclusion that my grandfather was not blind to the immorality of his actions. He was enabled by the legalisation of the looting of Jewish property, but he acted from an opportunism that was his own ... Beyond the complexity of historical contexts and the grey areas of any human endeavour, there are actions that were as wrong yesterday as they are today. Taking refuge in moral relativism while facing the shadows of history is an easy escape, but it leads to a dead end. Yet how many countries are stuck in denial under the pretext that they refuse to judge their imperial past by today's standards? ...

The millions of Europeans who directly and indirectly benefited from the slave trade while keeping a Bible by their beds were not ignorant or unenlightened. They were simply opportunists and hypocrites, bigots betraying their God when it suited them ... Throughout this dark history, voices, especially those of the enslaved and colonised themselves, were calling out these immoral double standards.

If Britain and other nations want to come to terms with their past, they need to accept a minimal consensus: slavery and colonialism cannot be explained by the "social and moral standards" of a different age ... Such consensus wouldn't "cancel" the debate; instead it would depolarise it. It would open the possibility for fruitful dialogue and help overcome the old victim-versus-perpetrator dialectic, replacing it with a culture of honesty and responsibility ... reading German historian Norbert Frei, I understood that the fact that we cannot know what we would have done "does not mean that we do not know how we should have behaved".

I flatter myself that with this statute we have in this country extinguished forever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind. (1786)

[James Madison clarifying the difference between freedom and toleration](#)