



THE BATTLE FOR MEMORY

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

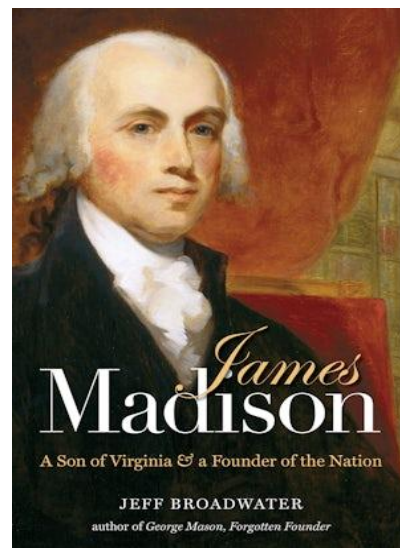
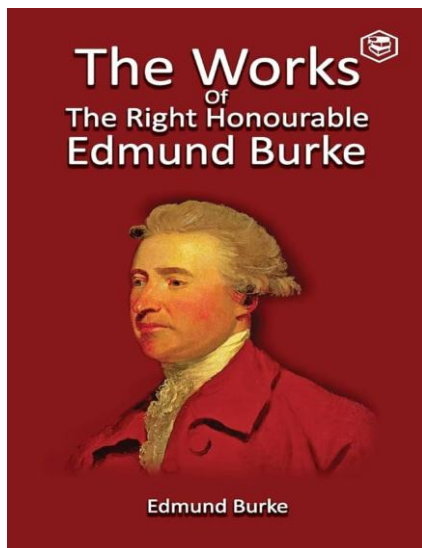
*THOU who stealest fire, From the fountains of the past,
To glorify the present, oh, haste, Visit my low desire!
Strengthen me, enlighten me! I faint in this obscurity,
Thou dewy dawn of memory.*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

*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 \(Tennyson\)](#)

Edmund Burke believed that memory is the debt we owe to posterity. When do enlightened empathy and virtue cut adrift from custom become lost and transform, as Burke feared, into abstract and [inhuman reason](#) emanating from a [futile pursuit of perfectibility](#)? As culture wars and turmoil over identity politics became topical, my postings on this became voluminous enough to warrant separation from the rest. Truth, Objectivity, and Impartiality, once thought of as hallmarks of the archival enterprise, became suspect under attacks from post-modernists and the “call to justice” emanating (inter alia) from what is sometimes called “critical theory”. Should we remain steadfast or yield our traditional values to a kind of [critical archiving](#) – *Through every passion ranging, And to your humours changing?* Are the old values incompatible with [Social Justice](#), as some archivists seem to believe?



What is the difference between Objectivity and Impartiality? What distinction was Acton making between Ethics and Dogma? Was James Madison wrong to prefer Freedom over Toleration? Ought we resist the [ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind](#) and heed his warning that passion, whether of the Right or the Left, [never fails to wrest the sceptre from reason](#)? What is our role as guardians of memory in the face of passion: [Black Lives Matter](#), [Statue Wars](#), [Frontier Wars](#), [Decolonisation](#), [Disrupting White Supremacy](#) and [Hetero-Patriarchy](#), [Disputed History](#), [Charges of Elitism and Bias](#), assaults on [Collections as Bastions of Racism](#), [Participatory Archiving](#), etc? How should the houses of memory respond to trends and what path should we tread between defending or revising the already established role and tone of our cultural institutions?



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*In judging men and things Ethics go before Dogma, Politics or Nationality.
The Ethics of History cannot be denominational. [Lord Acton](#)*

Who owns the past and who has claim to the artefacts that provide evidence of it? Do we champion the right to know or the creator's right to conceal? Should secrecy be protected when it is used to hide crime? Are we collectors of a heterogeneous detritus, meaningless until shaped by the hand of the compiler and actualised by the eye of the observer, or are we defenders of the stubborn facts interwoven by event and circumstance into enduring qualities to which the record testifies, awaiting our discovery of them and claiming our protection? Does our role as "memory's archivist" involve us in a great paradox: preserving intact unchanging evidence of a past that is [forever becoming](#)?

All history is contemporary history. [Benedetto Croce](#)

It would be easy to portray these postings as an ornery old man's diatribe against the evils of [relativism](#) and a misplaced irony about how the post-modern [Assault on Objectivity](#) begat the populist [Assault on Truth](#). These are issues for [everyone](#), of course, but the more particular question is how to be recordkeepers (in any age) within our societal context? Can we resist [collectivism](#) and be [Valiant-for-Truth](#) without [individualising](#) our understanding of context and subordinating the facts to zeal? Will the coziness and modish collegiality of [liberatory theories and practices](#) free us from old dogmas or simply enslave us to new ones? Can a proper regard for differences in Ideas [transcend](#) differences of Identity? If we do not submit totally to changing mores and no more resist them according to some sterile abstraction, how do we shape and (just as importantly) defend our mystery?



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2015, July 30: Stories with r/keeping themes

Has anyone seen [The Giver](#), a recent film based on a 1990's novel (popular in schools apparently) by [Lois Lowry](#)? The story is set in what is presumably a post-apocalyptic world. They have built a new, bounded, ideal society based on equality and same-ness. Uh-oh. People have been looking to substitute ideal worlds for the messy chaos of real life since Plato (without conspicuous success).

All memories of the past have been erased. Our hero, Jonas, is given the role of “Receiver” with the unique task of holding onto the erased memories in case they might be needed – a living record, in fact. The society is rule-based, like a recordkeeping system, and (whether intentionally or simply because with this kind of premiss they are unavoidable) parallels with r/keeping functionality abound : e.g. “use precise language”, “obey the rules”, “never lie”. As Receiver, Jonas is excused many of the rules and given special permissions. The last of these, considering his role as a living record, is a beauty:

5. You may lie.

Do records ever lie? Of course they do. Records lie all the time.

As with r/keeping, sameness is threatened by human emotion and passion. But there is a paradox. This society is an emotion-less hell but the people are shielded from memories that are ugly as well as beautiful. Recorded knowledge can be both harmful and liberating. Are people better off living an idealised, redacted, memory-free life or one in which pain, death, and ugliness jostle with truth and beauty? Are records instruments of control or of liberation? Both, obviously. Biblically, Jonas (or Jonah), apart from being unpalatable to the great fish, is the ambivalent, sometimes unwilling, messenger sent by God to Nineveh to preach against the city's wickedness.

In this story, as in life, things go awry. I doubt the author intended strong parallels with r/keeping, but I found them there all the same. Did anyone else?

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”.



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- 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.

<<**Barbara Reed: Wonderful stuff Chris. Most amusing and greatly suited to my Friday afternoon state.**>>

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.....* Mr Johnson is of the latter

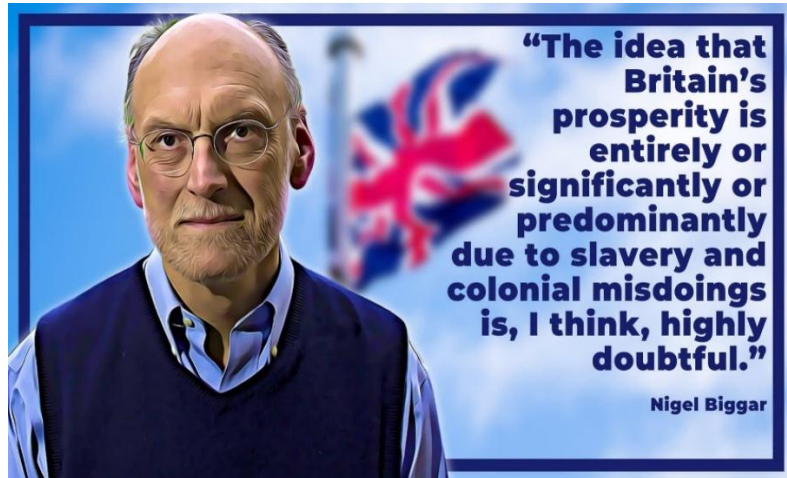


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persuasion and it irks me that such folk are able to promote themselves as free speech advocates. Her views are not 1,000 kilometers removed from issues arising under the offence provisions in our laws and the establishment of an office to promote 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.



[Jo Johnson](#)



[Nigel Biggar](#)

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?



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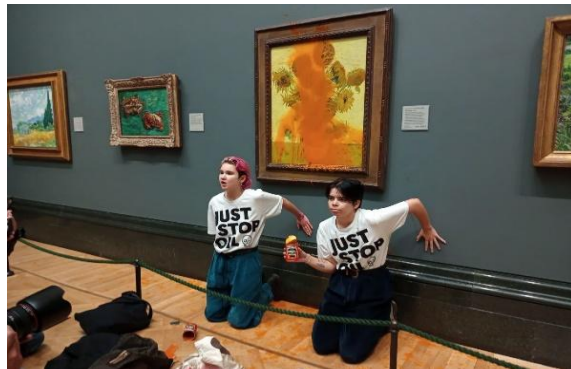
Not really an archives-and-records issue, I suppose, but we must live in the real world too. If you want a recordkeeping angle, what position do we take on the preservation of offensive records? The archives of *Der Stürmer*, for example, or records of some of the more out-there experiments in eugenics 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 to 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?

PS. The world IS divided into two camps: those who divide the world into two camps and those who do not.

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?



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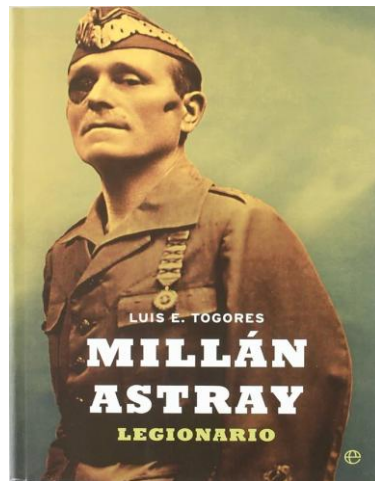
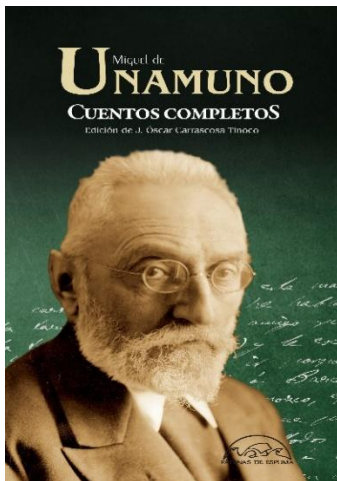
- Is it our job to uphold, to educate, to challenge, or to confront? By reference to what standards can our judgements and actions on any of these ticklish matters be submitted?

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.

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."



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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 Portillio'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)

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



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- **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'**>>

2023, May 19:

The National Gallery of Australia has commissioned [an independent review](#) of an upcoming exhibition following allegations that non-Indigenous arts workers contributed to



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works by Aboriginal artists. An [investigation](#) published by the Australian newspaper alleged that white workers had interfered in the making of black art in APY Art Centre Collective studios. Following the allegations, the National Gallery of Australia said it would review the provenance, authorship and the extent of the “hand of assistance” of artworks in a major exhibition featuring work from the APYACC ... In a statement, the APYACC strenuously denied that any of their artists were compromised ... Beverly Knight, the director of Alcaston Gallery, said she “was shocked by the level of assistance” but stood by the artist ... “I have been in hundreds of studios all over the world with assistants even doing all the work under direction,” she said ... The Art Gallery of South Australia ... said they would not be conducting a review into the provenance of the collective’s work ... The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia also said it stands by the works in its collection, which have been done by 12 artists in the collective ... Claire Summers, the executive director of the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair Foundation, said she was concerned by the allegations but was also worried about other issues in the industry. She said artists were being used by “unethical actors” ...

JOURNALIST: ... [Can I ask you about your comments](#) in *The Australian* today regarding the APY Arts Centre Collective and the calls from the NT Arts Minister calling their actions cultural theft and corruption. You've indicated you're open to an investigation. What are you proposing please?

BURKE: ... *The National Gallery of Australia has commissioned a review ... When that comes down, we'll have more facts than we have at our disposal at the moment ... I won't be telling First Nations artists whether or not they are allowed to be assisted ... and I won't be telling any creators what they can and can't create ... What matters is to make sure that people have creative control ... I certainly have no intention of implying a standard and set of rules around First Nations artists that are not applied to any other artists in the world or throughout history.*

According to [reporting](#) in last *Weekend Australian* (13-14 May), p.19 “Ministers canvass action over pain of an industry’s art break”, there has been growing confusion and concern over the matter.

The Pooh-Bah Defence ([merely corroborative detail](#) intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative):

APYACC has backed and filled, initially denying the charges and, when confronted by incontrovertible evidence, went from saying White staff “never” painted on the canvasses and there was “no intervention” to “background wash”. Many artists (e.g. Michelangelo, Rubens) have used assistants. Galleries often distinguish between “School of...” and “Work of ...” (admitting involvement by acolytes but seldom acknowledging it in the descriptions). This is, presumably, what Burke means by “rules ...that are not applied to any other artists in the world or throughout history.”

The Bad Apple Defence: (*The bad apples metaphor originated as a warning of the corrupting influence of one corrupt or sinful person on a group: that "one bad apple can spoil the barrel". Over time the concept has been used to describe the opposite situation, where "[a few bad apples](#)" should not be seen as representative of the rest of their group. This latter version is often used in the context of police misconduct*):

It seems, *pace* Burke, that Aboriginal art is regarded as being different by many, not least by Aborigines themselves – “*The practices that allegedly took place in the APYACC’s studios ... are not common in the sector, or acceptable*” ... “*This is all about the APY ... and its management – not the sector. There is nothing similar anywhere else. It is essentially a publicly funded commercial gallery – and there’s something rotten about it*”



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And the impact has been felt across the sector – “[It has] gone off a like a nuclear explosion in the industry” ... “This is the most anticipated story of the decade” ... “The revelations stopped me (for the time being) going ahead with the purchase of an Aboriginal artwork, as I need to be assured about authenticity” ... “I usually sell about half ... before a show opens. This time I haven’t sold any. I’m absolutely horrified” ... “weekend sales had dropped from a high of \$33,000 ... to a low of \$500” ... “These stories are hurting us – our artists, our families, our future” ... “Those who have been most impacted ... need to be able to share their experiences and this can only happen in a controlled, transparent, and safe environment.”



Predictably, it is seen (by some) as being merely about cultural (mis)appropriation-

NT Arts Minister Chansey Paech described white people painting on Indigenous canvasses as “corruption” and “cultural theft”.

Well, for us (I would hope) this story is not so much about cultural appropriation as about validity. What it shows (to me) is that corrupting the source cuts two ways. First, it undermines faith in the artefact itself, when you can no longer trust that the record is [genuine](#), it can no longer serve its primary purpose as evidence of fact. Second, it annihilates the character of the [sentinel](#), when the watchman is no longer accepted as a guarantor of authenticity then the recordkeeper’s [truth](#) is worthless.

When you cease to uphold Truth, anything may be a Lie.

We understand that how we describe and present the records can alter their meaning as powerfully as any act of destruction or concealment. But how if we believe that records have no meaning apart from our description and presentation? Our choice (and, based on that, our reputation as sentinels) seems to lie in deciding what we believe the [purpose](#) of recordkeeping to be

- discovering, honouring, and protecting their meaning [precedent](#) (their [original](#) meaning if you like) or
- applying an understanding [consequent](#) upon and [derived](#) from our interpretation of that meaning.

... there has been an explosion of efforts to examine the ways in which records and archives serve as tools for both oppression and liberation ... we broadly define critical archival studies as those approaches that (1) explain what is unjust with the current state of archival



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research and practice, (2) posit practical goals for how such research and practice can and should change, and/or (3) provide the norms for such critique. In this way, critical archival studies, like critical theory, is emancipatory in nature, with the ultimate goal of transforming archival practice and society writ large ... critical theory gives us an analysis of power in all its forms that is crucial to understanding the context of record creation, of archival functions, of the formation of archival institutions, of archival outreach and use and advocacy, of who becomes archivists and how and why, and of how we define and teach and practice core concepts ... As archivists and archival studies scholars, we can intervene and trouble and even sabotage some of the key ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical theory. This intervention could simultaneously explain and critique the core tenets of archival studies – notions of record, of provenance, of value, of representation, to name a few – that takes a long view of how potential evidence gets transmitted across space and time ...

Truth may well lie in between, but there is every difference in the world between pursuing Truth and pursuing an Agenda. There are [two abiding questions](#):

1. Without a regard for and dedication to authenticity (whatever that implies) how can we balance what a record means and what it says?
2. How can we separate making and keeping “good” records in a technical sense from the uses to which they are put?

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.

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

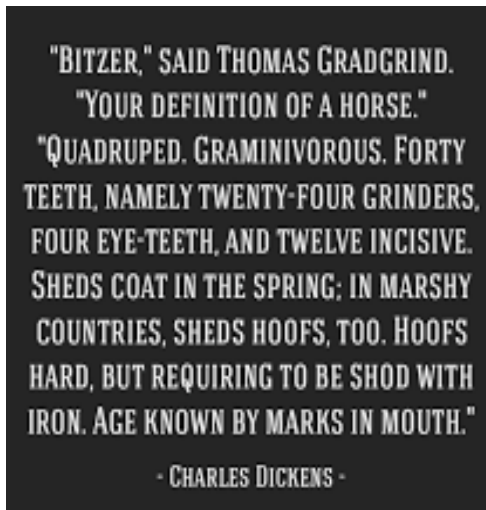
Fifty years on, it’s possible to be even more pessimistic about the state of our education system: it’s about what to think, not how to think. Not a new phenomenon; Dickens had it taped in his portrayal of Gradgrind. But Gradgrind would not have encountered the bickering over Facts that we endure now.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



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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 instill a sense of humour and proportion. Who said that? Mr Chipping, perhaps. Not possible nowadays, of course.

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*).



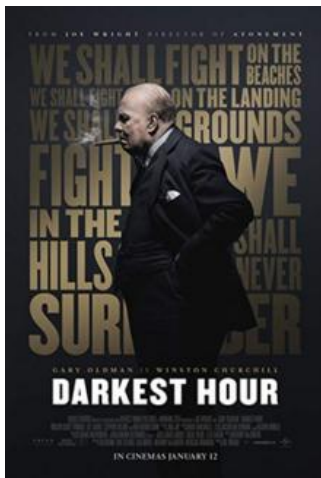
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... Graham declared a desire “to make sense of [how the fault lines began](#) ... to do what journalism cannot do.” ... Well, he is right on that. Journalism does not deliberately lie, like Darkest Hour lied, like The Crown lied, like All the Money 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.



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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. But it brought to mind a couple of Australian examples. One was the [mini-series Changi](#) - see the "Controversy and criticism" section of the wikipedia entry; a second was the [punch-up](#) between the truly wonderful historian Inga Clendinnen and novelist Kate Grenville; see . Also brought a smile when I read: "As witnesses to truth, we have a stake in this.". And alluding to an earlier post of Chris' about FOI and privacy, let's have another smile - by noting yesterday's 20th anniversary of the reported comments of the CEO Sun Microsystems Scott McNealy: "*You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it*". And as I was reminded by a recent interaction with my bank, it's our own fault that we have no privacy. >>

<< **we'll have a 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



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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.

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



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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?

2024, November 15:

If, as I believe, Terry Eastwood was essentially correct ([Archivaria 37](#) 1994, p. 124) that the ethos of r/keeping lies in our role as “knowledge-workers”, then understanding the limits of Knowledge should be important to us. There are plenty of studies into human cognition that uphold the view (however much we may wish it were otherwise) that the human response to “facts” is wilful rather than rational, or as Paul Simon puts it more poetically:

Still, a man hears what he wants to hear / And disregards the rest ([The Boxer](#))

It is understandable, then, that elites, reeling from an upsurge in populism (Brexit, Trump, The Voice) should doubt the power of knowledge and seek refuge in suppressing it (laws against misinformation, social media, and the like). That they should, in fact, lose faith in people's ability to handle it. But this is not new:

... 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 ... [J M Keynes](#), *My Early Beliefs* (1938)

Ortega labels those that have for centuries been responsible for providing the critical vital force for maintaining and developing civilization as “aristocrats.” These were the scientists, philosophers, politicians and other intellectuals who took responsibility for the enrichment and governing of civilization, and guided the progress of human society in all spheres of development. Critically, the masses had also historically ceded power to these aristocrats, allowing them to determine the distribution and access to the benefits thus created. Without the leadership of these aristocrats, Ortega argues, civilization as we know it could not have



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developed, and in fact, cannot now be maintained [Review](#) of *Revolt of the Masses* (1930) by José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955)

The intelligence age

In [The Conversation](#), Luke Munn (Research Fellow, Digital Cultures & Societies at the University of Queensland) argues that “Intelligence — even scaled, automated and operationalised by artificial intelligence — will not save us.”

“We have entered [the Intelligence Age](#),” proclaimed Sam Altman, the chief executive of OpenAI ... Altman joins other thought leaders ... in pinning humanity’s hopes on better information. The logic is enticing. By harvesting all the world’s knowledge, AI models can locate patterns, [make correlations](#), and offer data-driven “insights”. The optimal solutions to our biggest problems are [needles in a data haystack](#), so finding them [exceeds the limited human mind](#). It is up to technology like deep learning to “capture it all”, analyse or train on it – and then offer up the brilliant game-changing idea or most rational response ...

But the recent US election showed the limits of this rational framing of reality. [Viral rumours and conspiracy theories](#) (JD Vance and the couch, or “[they’re eating the pets](#)”) were gleefully shared. It seems some voters were motivated less by abstract policy and more by [visceral disgust](#) at those deemed different ... Humans are not perfectly rational and ethical. They are deeply [emotional, factional and frictional](#) – driven by feelings and friendships, fear and anger ... In the past five years, my research has explored how technologies construct knowledge – but also exploit emotion and amplify radicalisation. To understand the current political moment, we need to understand both the limits of reason and the power of unreason ... Intelligence is a dead end. The entangled social, political and environmental crises we now face will not be addressed by having more information ...

Reason creates a kind of ticking time bomb at the core of society. Reason is a flexible amalgam of information harvesting, data-driven decisions and optimised operations that wins votes and attracts investment. But because reason is uncoupled from ethics, it can and should be applied to anything: no aim is better or worse than any other ... The arc of reason eventually arrives at a brutish world ruled by the most brutal. Democratic “civilisation” collapses back into domineering barbarism ...

As reason’s grand promises inevitably collapse, people grow [disenchanted or disaffected](#), latching onto regressive worldviews that make the world make sense ... The power behind these narratives is not logical, but emotional. This is not the liberal subject, carefully weighing the facts before choosing the claim that best conforms to empirical evidence and contributes to the public sphere. No, it is about [grievance](#), [loss](#) and a sense of betrayal by the powers that be ... our moment is not the Age of Intelligence but the [Age of Anger](#). This is not to condone naked violence, baseless hatred and shameless propaganda, but to recognise the limits of reason in contemporary life. “If there is anything unique about the human animal,” philosopher [John Gray](#) observes, “it is that it has the ability to grow knowledge at an accelerating rate, while being chronically incapable of learning from experience” ...

2024, November 16:

The Conversation has coupled Luke Munn’s piece with one from [Jamie Q Roberts](#) (Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at Sydney U) seeking to explain the populist uprising evidenced by Trump’s election not as an emotional phenomenon, an uprising of the “disenchanted and disaffected” as Munn describes it, but (at least partly) in terms that the virtuous are probably better able to cope with: viz. a conspiracy of sorts taking the form of the “intellectual dark web” - *my God, the intellectual dark web just won the election!* This puts the blame not on the flawed human nature of the led but on the baleful influence of contrarians, an enemy more easily dealt with, I suppose.



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[Trump's celebrity supporters are] part of an immensely popular online phenomenon born in the mid-2010s: the intellectual dark web ... The intellectual dark web [has been described] as "a collection of iconoclastic thinkers, academic renegades and media personalities who are having a rolling conversation – on podcasts, YouTube and Twitter, and in sold-out auditoriums – that sound unlike anything else happening, at least publicly, in the culture right now" ...

The "core" of the intellectual dark web included [Joe] Rogan ... Jordan Peterson, neuroscientist Sam Harris ... and Eric Weinstein ... However, there were 50 or more others like Musk and [Tulsi] Gabbard ... who had similar values and concerns ... The rise of podcasting coincided with campus politics spilling over into the wider world. "Cancel culture", which grew out of this, has often been mentioned on Rogan's podcast as a problem. For the intellectual dark web, the worst aspects of campus politics are driven by postmodernism's degradation of traditional liberal values. Once, the great liberal objective was to try to grasp the truth – the nature of reality. This was done through open and civil discussion, and by drawing on reasoning and evidence.

The 1960s saw the rise of poststructuralism, which led to postmodernism from the 1980s. The latter was influenced by the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault, who was concerned with dissecting power ... Postmodern thinking argues there is no objective truth: apparent claims to it are always related to power. Postmodernism [became the unofficial philosophy](#) of identity politics – what many now refer to as being "woke".

For postmodern thinkers, the task of the intellectual activist is to prevent or transform the speech of the powerful. The introduction of gender-neutral pronouns (they/them) and, relatedly, the term "Latinx" (a gender-neutral term for Latino) are examples. For postmodern and "woke" thinkers, the "truth" that matters belongs to those without power in our society ... "There's no real world. Everything's a social construct," [Peterson said of postmodernism](#). "And it's a landscape of conflict between groups."

The intellectual dark web's criticism of "woke" politics is centred on this disputed reality (and ideas about power) – spanning issues as diverse as biological sex and gender, debates over police violence and Black Lives Matter, and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies. While they accept that social norms influence us, they object to the idea that language conjures reality into existence.

These kinds of discussions had, for decades, been routinely shut down in universities. For example, last year, students [called for the cancelling](#) of "gender-critical feminist" Holly Lawford-Smith's course on feminism at the University of Melbourne, due to her arguments for the significance of biological sex. And these opinions (which are associated with conservatism) are rarely heard in the liberal mainstream media, where conservatism is the enemy.

The intellectual dark web championed [free speech as the pathway to truth](#). Intellectual dark web thinkers do not believe in gender as a social construct: they see it as a biological reality, with real implications for men, women and relationships between them ... The intellectual dark web, in its commitment to reality, also bemoans the postmodern devaluation of merit. "I think the pathology that's at the core of the culture war is an attack on competence itself," [says Peterson](#) ... This devaluation of merit is at the core of the intellectual dark web's criticisms of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives ...

While Trump won for many reasons, including immigration and the economy, my sense is that Trump, forever the populist, harnessed a widespread dissatisfaction with a form of identity politics promulgated by a quite often well-paid, white-collar class: psychologist Steven Pinker's "[chattering class](#)" ... Now, [these] ideas and figures have helped elect a president, and some of them – Musk, Gabbard and Kennedy Jr – have roles in Trump's administration.

I find Munn more convincing, though I dread the implications. There are culture wars going on with echoes amongst the disaffected but I think Roberts over-emphasises their impact on the downtrodden and the deplorables by a long way - *Trump won for many reasons*. And I think the cohesion is more apparent than real. Someone who couples Joe Rogan, RFK Jr, Elon Musk,



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Tulsi Gabbard, Douglas Murray, Ben Shapiro, Jordan Petersen, and Steven Pinker together just isn't listening. The only thing that unites them is push-back (some of it credible, some of it shonky) against the excesses of woke, identity, DEI and other virtuous enthusiasms. Wrapping them all together like that pushes everything to extremes, in just the same way that excessive virtue does, and leaves no "grey zone" for reason to operate. The more of that there is, the more likely Luke Munn's doleful predictions become.

If it is accepted (by both sides) that some of the criticisms of the excesses of woke are reasonable, a basis exists for rational discourse. If that cannot be accepted, Munn may well be right and the dialectic is doomed. But either way, whether any of that is particularly relevant to the demons of populism is another matter entirely (it seems to me),

PS. According to *Wikipedia*: "Those who have been labelled as being part of the [IDW](#) include both liberals and conservatives" but it is generally approved by the right and condemned by the left (when it is not simply regarded as a joke). It's ironic, isn't it, that one could almost apply the term "counter-culture" (a term once used to describe the groovy, postmodern, social justice uprising itself) to the IDW because it is now rebelliously pushing-back against the excesses of triumphant (dominating) wokism, identity politics, DEI etc.

2024, December 9:

Things just got [even weirder](#) in the US.

<< The 'Crucial Communism Teaching Act' comes after Republicans hit out against [critical race theory](#) in schools and teachings such as the 1619 Project ...

'American students should learn about the Soviet gulags ...' Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, said at the press conference. 'They should learn about Mao's great leap forward ... that killed 10s of millions of Chinese. They should learn about modern day slavery happening right now with Uighur Muslims.' 'From the Marxist-infused radicalism of the '60s to the critical race theory trends of today, I don't think the Soviets could have imagined a better ally than the Democrat socialists of America ... ' The bill is meant to 'ensure communism remains in the trash heap of history where it belongs,' he added ...

The federal government's authority over public education has always been limited, as most is left up to states and localities. The federal government provides only 7% of the money spent on public education. And under the Every Student Succeeds Act, which replaced No Child Left Behind during President Obama's tenure, the federal government is banned from telling schools what to teach. But, the legislation simply builds a curriculum and provides materials through the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation for states and local educators to use ...

Eleven states have enacted bills banning the teaching, or the use of the 1619 Project in curriculum. The 1619 project is a New York Times Magazine series that argues the founding of America should be marked when the first slaves arrived here, in 1619. It puts slavery and racism at the center of American history. Earlier this year Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Mo., and Rep. Dan Bishop, R-N.C., introduced companion bills that would have banned teaching critical race theory in schools. That legislation got 51 co-sponsors in the House. >>

The battle for History, Truth, and the minds of the un-informed isn't really about the past (and no one is less informed to begin with than the young, though viewers of Sky-After-Dark come a close second). It acquires that colour when activists, the virtuous, and ideologues of any stripe (mis)use ideas about the past to uphold their obsessions. I'm not a great fan of the phrase "as



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history teaches ..." but if it can be said to teach us anything it is that one obsession is likely to beget another.

If r/keeping has any justification it is dedication to the idea that authentic, reliable evidence can (if properly used) curb such obsessions and assist (no more than that) the search for Truth. The process of truth-sifting and fact-checking takes place outside our remit. We should not imagine, however, that r/keeping, like teaching, is immune from the efforts of those (from without and alas also from within) who would bend it to their obsessions. Ideologues, the virtuous, and those who knit IDW critics into a single, homogenous cohort – however well (or ill) meaning – don't want their obsessions curbed and can't be expected to put that dedication (our dedication) above their own agendas.

Aahhh, but "*if properly used*" (even before you begin the truth-sifting and the fact-checking) opens up a whole other line of debate, doesn't it? A debate in which disputed ideas about *objectivity vs impartiality* and *commitment vs bias* come into play.

The House on Dec. 6 passed the Crucial Communism ...

PS. I am not wholly critical of Sky-After-Dark. Some of their push-back is informative and useful. But, like all ideologically motivated commentary, it is also often mis-directed and malevolent. Sifting the good from the bad is sometimes just too much of an effort.

2024, December 11:

<< **The 'Crucial Communism Teaching Act' comes after Republicans hit out against critical race theory in schools and teachings such as the 1619 Project ...>>**

Got to wondering why it's called "Crucial". Possibly an attempt to counter "critical"? Couldn't find anything useful in Google, but I did come across this gem:

What are the 7 ideologies?

Contents

- 1 Anarchism. 1.1 Classical. 1.2 Post-classical. ...
- 2 Authoritarianism. 2.1 General. 2.2 Other. ...
- 3 Communitarianism. 3.1 General. 3.2 Other. ...
- 4 Communism. 4.1 Authoritarian. 4.1.1 Leninism. ...
- 5 Conservatism. 5.1 General. ...
- 6 Corporatism. 6.1 General. ...
- 7 Democracy. 7.1 General. ...
- 8 Environmentalism. 8.1 Bright green environmentalism.

[More items...](#)

Of course, the [correct answer](#) is "There are many different types of ideology".

PS. According to [some sources](#), the Act is bipartisan. Not that it makes ideological control of the educational agenda any less fraught (cf. [Valiant Bear's](#) "*skepticism of an existing government providing doctrinal guidance on what is good or bad about another form of government*").

2025, January 16:

Just finished glancing through Johan Norberg's [Open: How Collaboration and Curiosity Shaped Humankind](#) (2020) which argues, broadly, that the contest for our souls is not between Left and Right or between dogmatic Virtue and authoritarian Populism but between Open-ness and Orthodoxy. It unashamedly takes the viewpoint of *global history* "*that tries to correct for how national history tries to compartmentalize the human experience for patriotic purposes*"



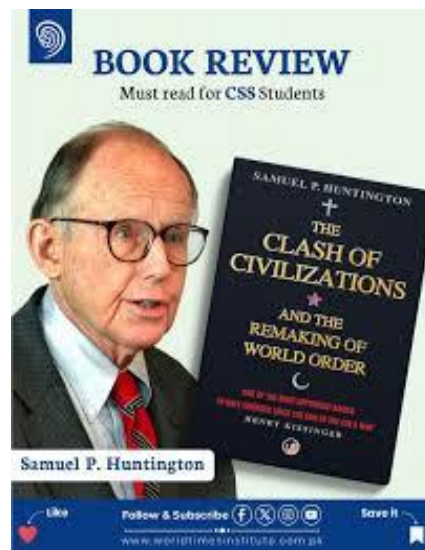
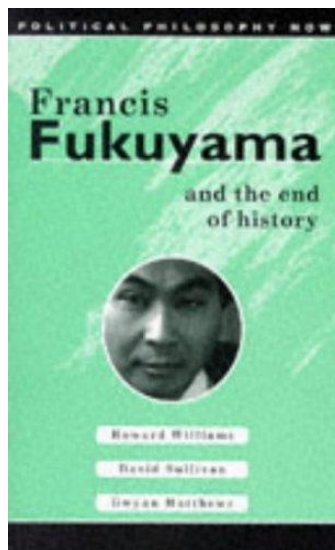
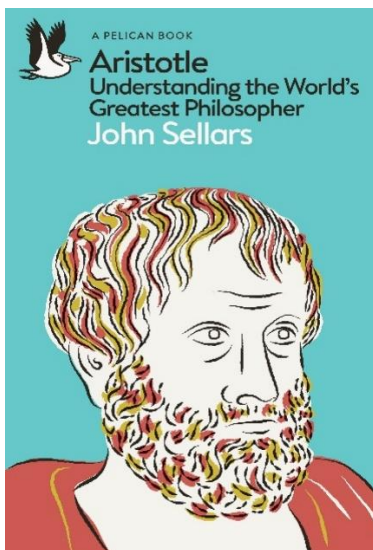
(p.13). It is on the side of liberal market capitalism and it uses the metaphor of *traders* (open to change) and *tribalists* (clinging to custom and belief). The tussle between them provides Norberg with a spectrum along which to analyse the degree to which people, countries, societies, identities, and ideas resist or embrace change. Two examples of his approach:

Role of Aristotle in Shaping the Western Mind

The roots of modern science were global, not European. A central role would be played by the newly discovered works of Aristotle ... [They] found his ideas about how logic could be used to observe the world and acquire empirical ideas that could be compared, criticized and accumulated [had an] intellectual power [that] was enough to shake the medieval world. It was an impressive and well-integrated system ... it was tempting but dangerous ... Students were said to be intoxicated with the new ideas and grew bold. Christian doctrines that could not be proven by reason and logic were criticized ... in 1210, the teaching and reading of Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics* was banned ... on pain of excommunication ...

The most ambitious and important attempt at reconciling Aristotle with Christianity was done by the young Thomas (1225-74) from the city of Aquinas [who] outlined an idea about a rational and beautiful universe [in which] man can attain knowledge about the world through the evidence of the senses and reason and logic without any divine grace or illumination ... In 1323, Aquinas was canonized ...

... No further proof is needed of the fact that all ideas can stifle progress if they are turned into orthodoxy than the fact that in the hands of religious and political authorities, even Aristotelian ideas could fossilize and suppress new ideas. European universities that had banned Aristotle's books now made them obligatory, and the Church turned some of his hypotheses ... into dogmas that were not to be questioned ... conveniently [forgetting] Aristotle's insistence that all theories, including his own, have to face *'the test of the facts of life, and if it harmonizes with the facts we must accept it, but if it clashes with them we must suppose it to be mere theory'* (pp.141-146).



Fukuyama vs Huntington

Around the time of the fall of Communism ... Francis Fukuyama [argued] that liberal capitalist democracies were the final form of government and that history had in effect ended ... In 'The Clash of Civilizations' ... Samuel Huntington ... thought a new phase of history was starting ... that would be defined by traditional civilizations ... Ideology and commercial interests would mean less ... as countries with similar traditions would grow closer. Tensions would appear and wars be waged along the borders of the different civilizations, like the West, Eastern Orthodox, Chinese, Islam, Hindu, Japan, Latin America and Africa ... the popular verdict has



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been that Huntington was quickly proven right whereas Fukuyama's thesis was just an extreme example of exaggerated hopes ...

The popular verdict is wrong ... [Fukuyama's] point was that the ideological and political battles during the twentieth century had shown that no system was able to produce wealth better than free market capitalism and no political system was better at giving citizens a sense of recognition and dignity than liberal democracy ... There is no lack of problems and difficulties in free market democracies but, unlike authoritarian systems, they are open to improvements because they are full of experiments, feedback loops and mechanisms for self-correction ...

Meanwhile, history has not been ... kind to Samuel Huntington's predictions ... except for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which represented America's attempts to prevent chaos and terrorism, all major wars in recent decades have been fought *within* Huntington's civilizations rather than between them ... [They look] much more like traditional power politics than a civilizational struggle. The bloodthirsty Islamic State primarily killed other Muslims ... While there are dangerous rifts between countries from different civilizations. ... many of the most dangerous tensions exist between countries that are historically as close as it gets, like North and South Korea, and China and Taiwan (pp. 362-366).

I can't help feeling that from an Olympian perspective of *global history* it is possible to "prove" almost anything, but I like watching Norberg try. It will be interesting to see if trade wars and ill-temper are about to close the door on open-ness for a bit.

PS

<< except for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which represented America's attempts to prevent chaos and terrorism, all major wars in recent decades have been fought *within* Huntington's civilizations rather than between them>>

One might have to add what's happened in Gaza to Huntington's side of the ledger.

2025, January 17:

On the way out, Joe Biden has [refined](#) Jamie Q Roberts' admonitions about an IDW conspiracy by warning of "an oligarchy of the ultra-wealthy ... threatening the future of democracy".

Some of the world's richest individuals and titans of its technology industry have flocked to Trump's side in recent months, including billionaire Elon Musk, who spent more than \$US100 million (\$160 million) helping Trump get elected. Americans are being "buried under an avalanche of misinformation and disinformation" as social media giants like Mr Musk's X and Mark Zuckerberg's Meta give up on fact-checking, Mr Biden said.

But Biden's analysis (such as it is) veers off into a rant making historical parallels with the exercise of power for its own sake and for reasons of profit. That being so, it would seem to be ideologically motiveless.

"[There will be] dangerous consequences if their abuse of power is left unchecked ... we see the consequences all across America and we have seen it before." ... "We must hold the social platforms accountable to protect our children, our families, and our very democracy from the abuse of power."

This is all just a bit muddled. At least Roberts offers a reason for worrying about IDW – a fear that ideological bias depraves straight thinking. But Biden fails to explain how wealth, in and of itself, threatens democracy. Yes, wealthy voices are disproportionately powerful but WHY are they pushing their dangerous ideas? Lkening the problem to Eisenhower's warnings about the military-industrial complex makes it seem to be more about the abiding evils of power and influence than more recent ideological passions.



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The “*oligarchy of the ultra-wealthy*” has become obscene as the middle class has been hollowed out, as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. It’s the impoverishment of the rest of us (not the existence of the ultra-wealthy as such) that has led to an uprising of the “*disenchanted and disaffected*” as described by Luke Munn. Alongside that, is resentment felt by the desperate against of the peripheral excesses of woke preached at them by elites. Like Roberts, Biden is looking in the wrong place. It’s not so much the existence and misdeeds of the wealthy that’s at the root of the problem, it’s the “*[grievance](#), [loss](#) and a sense of [betrayal](#) by the powers that be*” felt by the downtrodden and the deplorables.

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”.

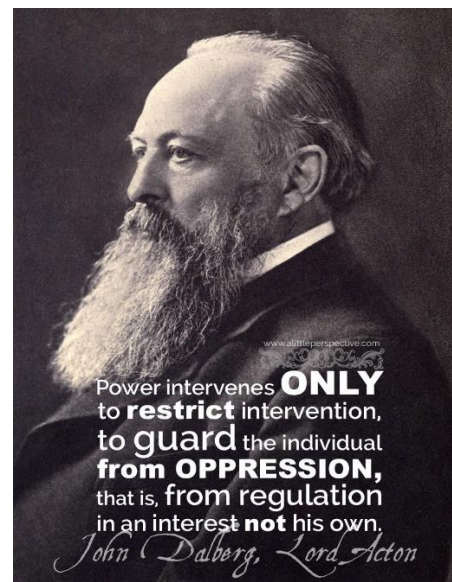
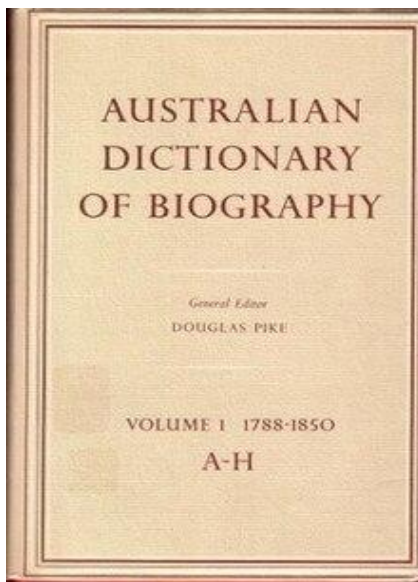
At a time when identity and group offence is easily taken, it seems there may now be a Polish defence that is available to distinguish between individuals and the group. It reminds me of an old joke: *I love mankind, it’s people I can’t stand.*



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



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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.*”

<<... 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,



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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.

To take this back to where it started, history, I reckon that the test is a variation on the old Perry Mason court room oath: Do you swear that your history tells the truth (i.e. what you say is supported by facts), the whole truth (i.e. you didn't leave out facts that don't support your history), and nothing but the truth (i.e. you didn't leaven the facts with things that you make up).



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Of course, this leaves plenty of room for interpretation. The historian has to select the facts to be included and, then, analyse them. The facts may contradict each other. And just because someone says "X because Y" doesn't mean that it is true. But a history will distinguish between a recital of the facts and the analysis.

(To give an example. Robert Gray Ford was being investigated by a formal inquiry. One of the allegations was that he used departmental resources to benefit himself; specifically, he had one of his subordinates draw up plans for Ford's personal machinery. Ford explained that this was all a mistake. He had intended the draftsman to do the plans in his own time, after office hours, but the draftsman had interpreted it to mean he should do the work in 'free time' during office hours. When this explanation was put to the draftsman, he agreed that it had been a misunderstanding. This explanation was accepted by the Inquiry and Ford was cleared of this charge. All these are facts. But then you read the transcript of evidence. The misunderstanding would have been immediately apparent as soon as Ford and the draftsman discussed payment for the plans prepared in the draftsman's own time. The implication of this evidence is that this discussion didn't occur, and, further, Ford clearly didn't pay for the plans out of his own pocket. You can't test this, because the Inquiry didn't ask any questions about payment for the work. Another fact, however, is that the draftsman claimed overtime while he was preparing the plans, and Ford signed off on the draftsman's overtime claims. From this I conclude that it's likely that Ford lied to the Inquiry and the allegation was actually true. Further, as the inquiry didn't ask any questions about payment, an obvious way of testing Ford's evidence, I think I can safely assume that the Inquiry, at best, wasn't particularly thorough and, at worst, was a whitewash. Now, you can agree or disagree with my conclusions, but 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



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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 -

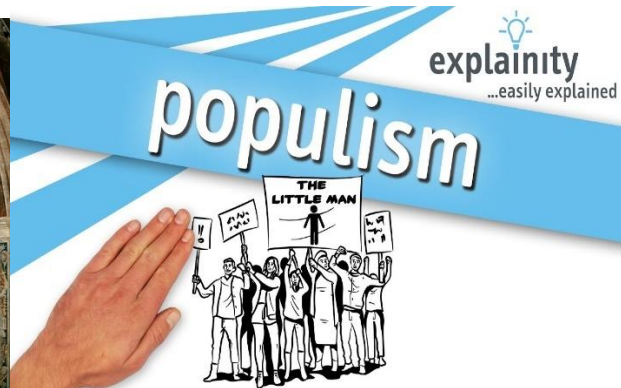
... researchers tend to agree populism has two core principles:

- 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



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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 downtrodden 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 downtrodden 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



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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):** ... fully acknowledging that conciseness may well be construed as, or even a result of, naivety : 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, February 22:

<<**Michael Piggott:** ... I'd offer two further references.

The first is a quote from George Henderson (1870-1944), Professor of History and English at the University of Adelaide for over 20 years. So a little later than Lord Acton (1834-1902) who Chris quoted so tellingly, but still from an era which embarrassingly assumed an historian was male. Anyway, in a paper printed in 1912, Henderson wrote *"...a good historian is not an advocate. His attitude of mind approximates more closely to that of the dramatic than the lyrical poet. He may take the liberty of explaining and elucidating, but always with strict regard to the paramount importance of impartiality. In the preparations of his thesis the student of original historical documents knows neither employer nor capitalist, Radical nor Conservative, Catholic nor Protestant,*



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Buddhist nor Christian ..' [This and similar quotes are gathered in one of the late Gerald Fischer's little bibliographic gems, *Henderson on History & Archives* (Pump Press Pamphlet No 17, 85 numbered copies of which were printed to mark the 4th Biennial Conference of the ASA in Adelaide in May, 1983].

The second is to draw attention to the efforts of [Honest History](#), which has just officially wound up after trying to focus on balanced history during the 'festival of Anzacery', i.e. the four crazy years of Australia's First World War centenary.>>

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 ...

[Irving] was trying to dispense with something human beings find essential for life – the ability to draw conclusions from evidence. He was saying that we can't trust anything – neither records, nor the testimony of tens of thousands of witnesses. And if he was right, then where did that leave what we call history? If we can't know that the Holocaust happened, how could we know that Napoleon fought at Waterloo or that Henry VIII had six wives? How could we know anything? He was luring us into a world without facts, where everything could be a lie, a conspiracy, a legend, a hoax. A world where the ground swallows you up in doubt.

... I find it interesting to think that the last bastion of truth might be the law, although the whole legal edifice is built upon the notion that truth is pragmatic. It's never necessary to prove absolute truth, just beyond a certain level of doubt. Personally, I still think that while "truth" doesn't exist, lies certainly do.

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

I was struck by “How could we know anything? He was luring us into a world without facts, where everything could be a lie, a conspiracy, a legend, a hoax.” The thing about this that struck me is the implicit assumption by the author that he used to live in a world of truthful historical narratives. Anyone who has read any history knows that much of the grand narrative history that everyone knows is a legend (at best) or a lie (at worst).

The Guardian has another relevant series at the moment on the frontier wars in Australia (which I would encourage everyone to read). A theme through the series is how the traditional truth of the white take-over of Australia was, in fact, a lie. I reckon the whole series should be read, but this one in particular for the historical perspective...>>

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



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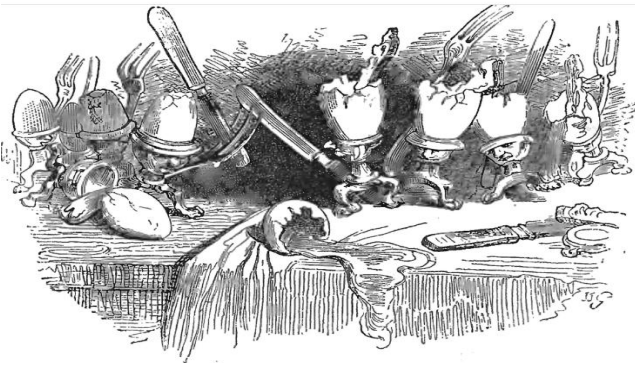
a conclusion. Not wishing to preach, but that is why Freedom of Thought and Expression is called the first freedom, because it under-lays everything else.

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 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



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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



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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.

*** (Actually, medieval sheep, not cattle :-)>>

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 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.



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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.



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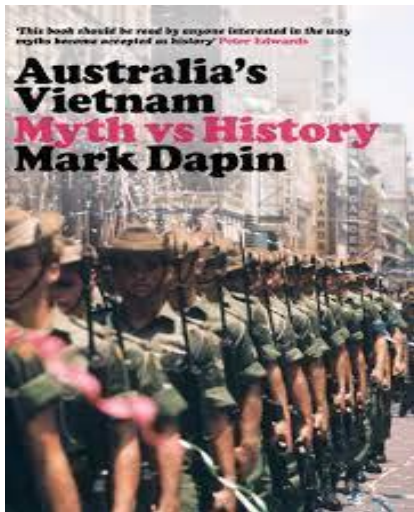
“False,” of course, is often conditional and sometimes subjective. It’s a standard that would be hard to enforce, subject to the whims and political ideas of judges and juries.

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, 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 protestors 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 skewed, 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”?



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... 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. >>



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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](#)



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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 archetypal 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.>>

2019, June 14: [History vs Myth \(2\)](#)

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 assemble 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



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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.

2019, August 20: **New book: A Matter of Facts**

<<**Joanna Sassoon:** [An interview with Laura A. Millar: "Truth matters. Facts matter. Evidence matters more."](#) *The first volume in the new Archival Futures series published jointly by the [Society of American Archivists \(SAA\)](#) and [ALA Neal-Schuman](#), Laura A. Millar's new book [A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age](#) is an urgent manifesto for our "post truth" world. The archives luminary, who was honored with the 2011 Waldo Gifford Leland Award, encourages readers to understand more fully the importance of their own records and archives, for themselves and for future generations. In this wide ranging interview, she talks about her reasons for writing the book, why she chose "evidence" as its core concept, and her outlook for the future.>>*

<<**Michael Piggott:** ... Laura made a most impressive (in my opinion) [submission](#) to the recent National Archives Tune review. Here's a sample:

"1) Distinguishing Information from Evidence



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In today's post-truth, post-fact world, we desperately need evidence of actions, transactions and decisions, not just 'information' or 'content' or 'data'. As I explain in *A Matter of Facts*, data are some combination of elements of raw content, such as numbers or letters, and information is contextualized data, or data infused with layers of meaning. A record captures information or data in a fixed medium; it is a 'whole' thing: an email, a report, or a text message. Evidence is any source of information that provides demonstrable proof. We cannot say that an email is only information, or a photograph is always evidence or a database is just data. If the source—data element, photograph album, or email message—can be used to provide proof of actions, transactions, or decisions, then it has evidential value. While the NAA is often tasked with managing 'information,' in fact what the institution really does is protect authentic and reliable evidence. To do this, the NAA begins by distinguishing information from evidence; then ensuring both are managed effectively; and ultimately protecting core evidence so that government can be held to account and people's rights are protected. In your review, I urge you to recognise this distinction between information and evidence and direct your recommendations toward the NAA's core responsibility: to protect sources of documentary evidence so they may stand as unassailable proof." >>

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.

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).



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*)

Sleary: "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*)



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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.

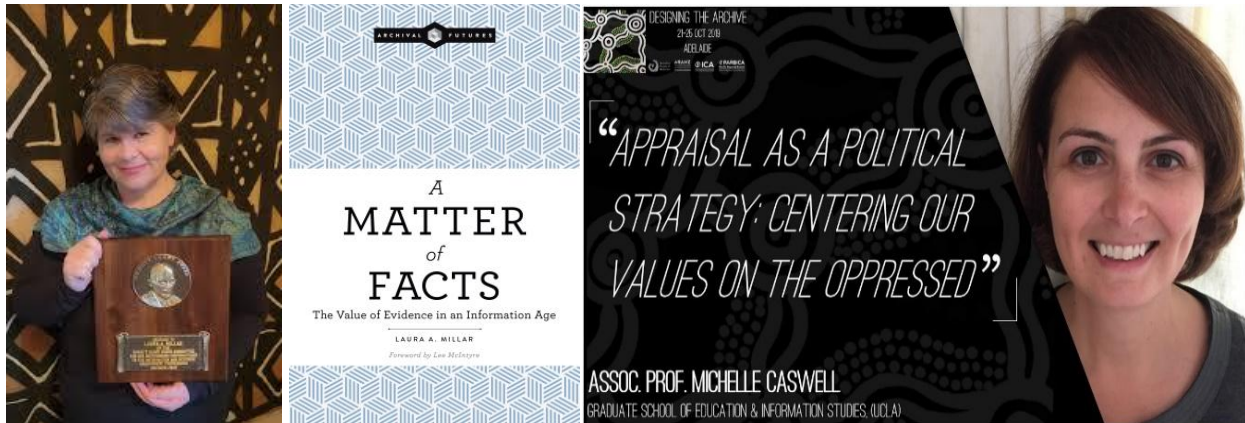
2019, October 25: ADELAIDE 2019 – Keynote 1 Feminist Standpoint Appraisal

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



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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.



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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 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, 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.



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A [report](#) in *Nature* about reproducibility suggests that they have their problems too. It's never too late, however, to learn how to learn.



“What is *Terewth*?”

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?



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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.



“... what we found is that, even before we get to the stage of labeling something misinformation, people often have trouble discerning the difference between statements of fact and opinion,” said Jeffery J. Mondak, a professor of political science ... if we don't have this shared sense of reality, then standard journalistic fact-checking – which is more curative than preventative – is not going to be a productive way of defanging misinformation ...”

Assumptions are things that may be true but cannot be proven to be true at this time ... *Assumptions* are necessary evils ... the better your assumptions are, the stronger your plan will be – and the more likely it will be to succeed. The danger lies in making the wrong assumptions, or worse still, failing to recognize them as assumptions at all.

[Forbes 17 March, 2024](#)

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



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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 poison 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



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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, 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



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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 – unrebuked 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?

Depicted as a warmonger, the future PM had a very modern dislike of media criticism, reveals new book



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.

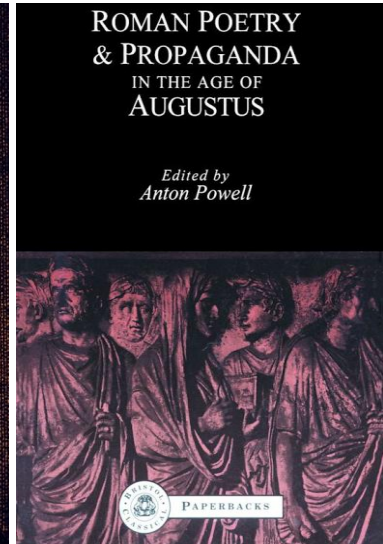
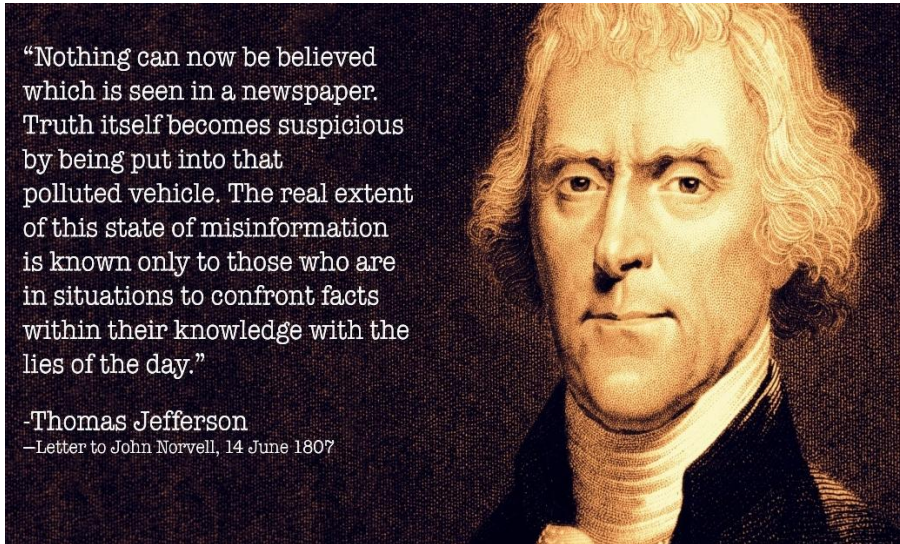
Churchill declined to apologise for his wrongful allegation and merely thanked the *Herald* for its “assurance” that the photograph had not been tampered with...

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” ...



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<<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, 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.



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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 \[or Czech\] 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



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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



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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?

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>>

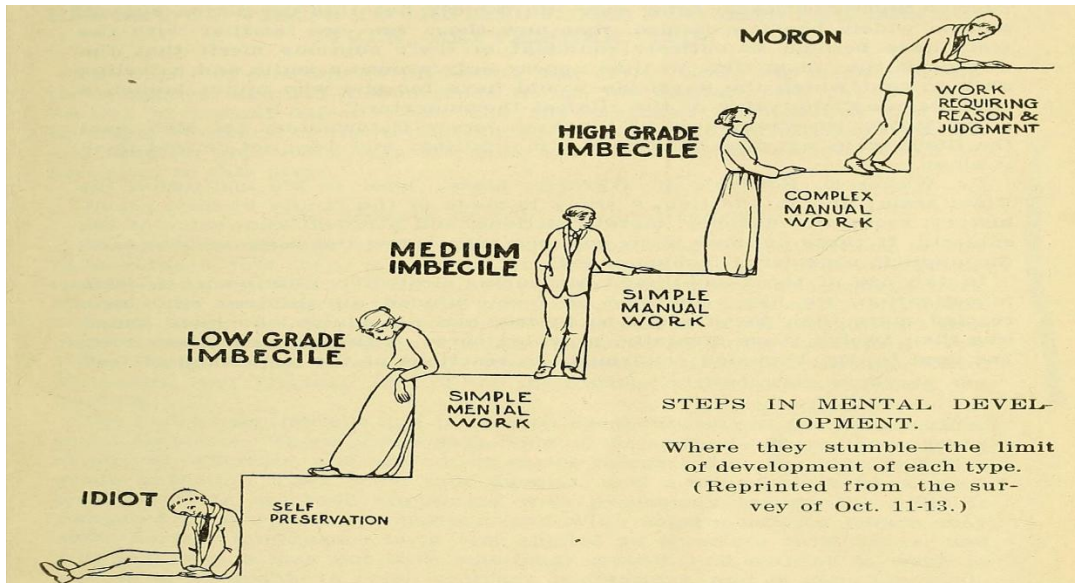


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And this has two aspects (at least)

- 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 -



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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



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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".



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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.

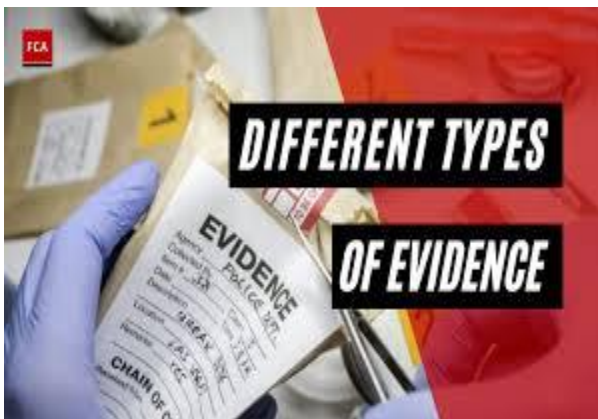
My take on this, because I’m the descriptionguy after all, is that one way this happens is through “description”. Archivists are recordkeepers because they continue the process of “creation” within the continuum. Records-making and records-keeping are not successive stages in a life cycle. In the old 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



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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:

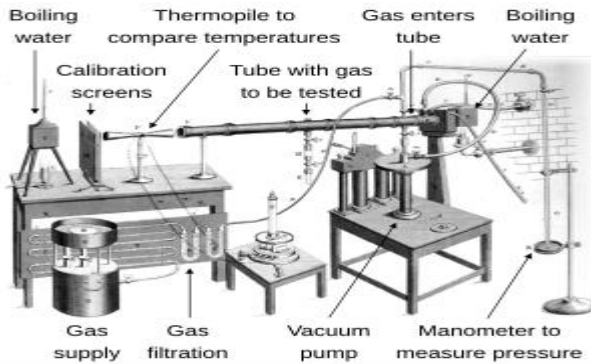
The distinction between record and information (and evidence too, for that matter) is well demonstrated in discussions about the "pre-industrial baseline". This concept is fundamental in studying climate change which is measured (in part) by tracking temperature changes and their effects. But "change" 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



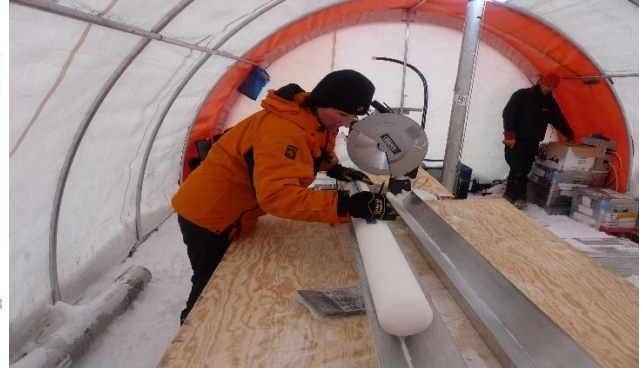
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anomalies such as solar activity, changes in the earth's orbit, [The Little Ice Age](#), and unusual volcanic activity.

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.



[John Tyndall's ratio spectrophotometer](#)



[Ice Core Samples \("Natural Archives"\)](#)

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, 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



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a good thing if we avoid the wowserism 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 wowserism, 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.

ROOTS OF CRITICAL THEORY

- ▶ Frankfurt School philosophy
- ▶ Karl Marx
- ▶ Knowledge in society is NOT objective
- ▶ Organizational communication scholars operating from a critical theory attempt to reveal how social and technological structures within organizations serve to oppress workers



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 Despot 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.



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- 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.



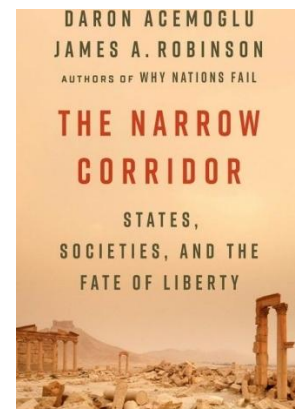
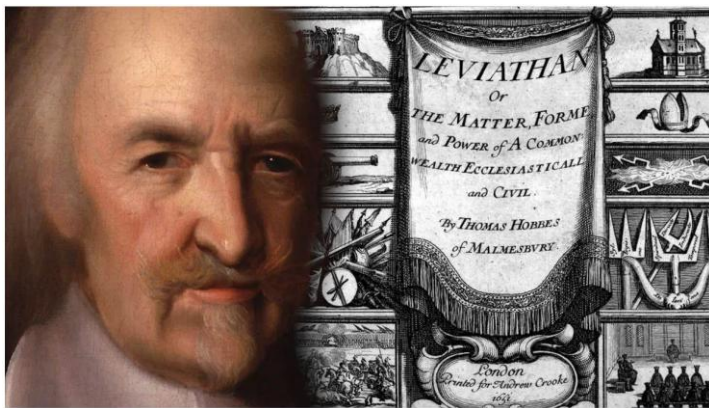
Red Queen Effect

It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place



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.



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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*)



2021, January 10: Emotional “evidence”

A good [example](#) of the power of the artefact –

Inside the pages of the old school atlas, the small boy holds the pencil, angling it as he edges around Australia’s shores. My father’s hand has been here, tracing the coast, the grey lead pencil pushed down hard into the paper. My father’s atlas appeared in the family house pack-up after he died and somehow made it home with me ... I held it tight to get it home. Few of the family records had ever left my parents’ house, and this felt like contraband ... His name alone, scrawled across the torn brown paper cover, was enough to suggest what I might find in its pages. A sort of journey. A charting of a life. A discovery. Now I’m tracing back, beyond my time, to see the boy of 10, a 3D image arising from a 2D format, the way a globe grapples with the flatness of a page ...

This old school atlas that belonged to my father moves me in a weird, intergenerational, multidimensional, multi-layered way. It’s as if we were walking, side by side ... Maps have many purposes. To demarcate, claim dominion, project power ... “... And no maps – even the most scrupulously researched – are completely free of editorial decisions or points of view.” ... For me, Dad’s atlas speaks of home: the seeking of it, the leaving of it, the making sense of one’s place within the world. I’ll never know the full story.

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



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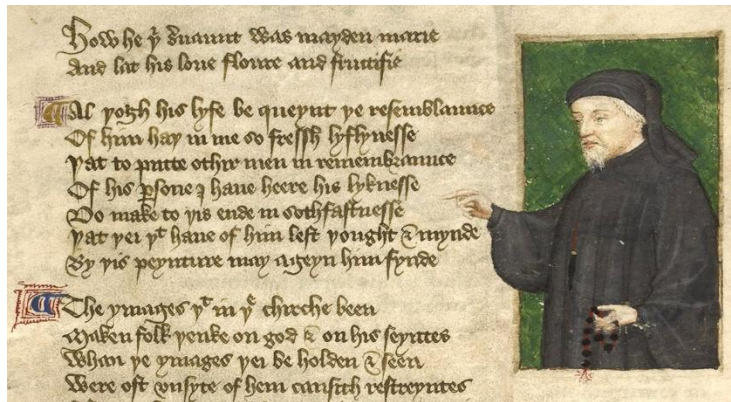
identification so wrong? Wouldn't there have to be markings on the counterfeit blue band that matched the registered details of the Alabama owner. Or what????

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



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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



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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 ...

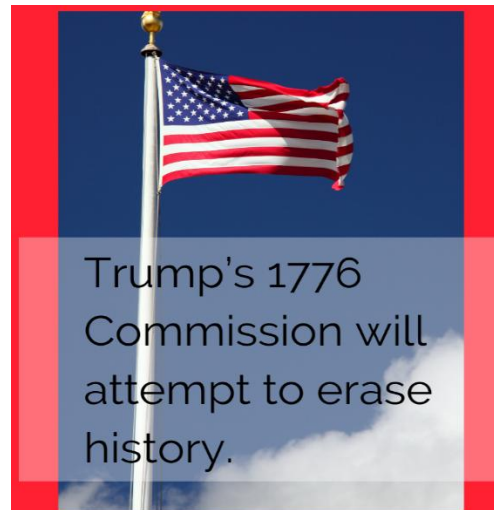
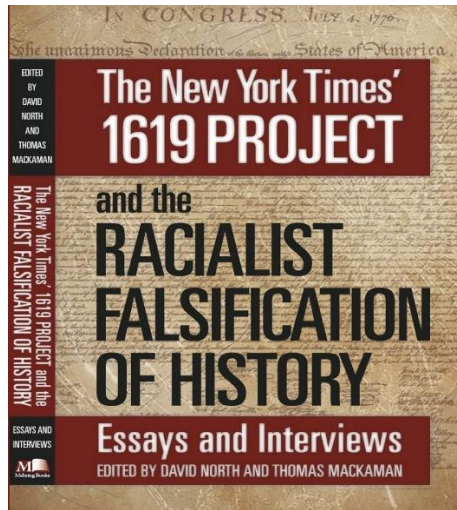
Like men with a guilty conscience, those promoting these history wars accuse others of the crime they are committing, because it is not historians but politicians who are fomenting



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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

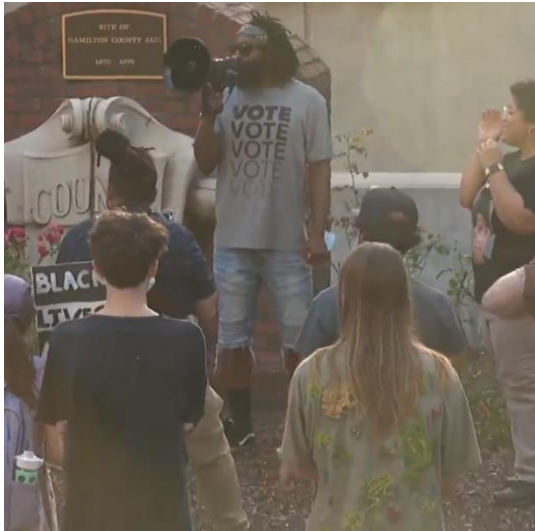
A Tennessee librarian has lost his job after allegedly burning copies of books by [Donald Trump](#) and rightwing commentator Ann Coulter. The Chattanooga public library dismissed Cameron Dequintez Williams after he allegedly posted videos of himself in his backyard in December pouring lighter fluid 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



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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"? [CH 2025: As, indeed, [there are](#).]



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



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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



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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 ...

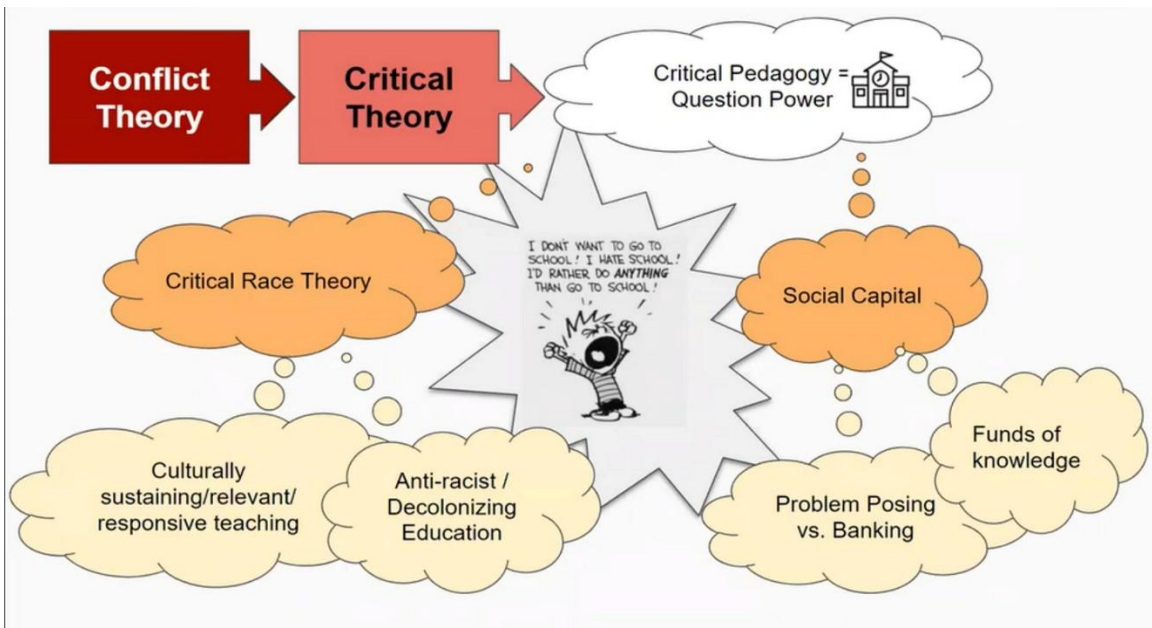
How to strike a balance, when recontextualising, between the actual and the perceived, between what is and what is “considered”? In other words, what is it that drives our pursuit of context – our own best judgement or the sensibilities of our audience, a desire to comprehend or a desire to please? Should 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,



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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.



Culture War

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 \(Irish President\)](#)



Michael D Higgins

Sounds like parallel provenance to me. But then, I would say that, wouldn't I?

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



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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.

2023, March 7: Holiday reading - The edge of memory

Patrick Nunn [*The edge of memory: ancient stories, oral tradition and the post-glacial world*](#) (2018)

I bought this a year or so ago and laid it aside unread (as you do). Picked it up again the other day and leafed through it. The central thesis (indeed practically the only thesis) is: ... *recent research has demonstrated with a high degree of plausibility that humans can pass on memories for several thousand years without the assistance of literacy* ... (p.205). There wasn't, it seemed to me, much forensic examination of the particular memories described (many of them Australian) to support this general idea. But I didn't do a page-by-page examination – when you've read the same point made over and over, you tend to lose interest. Nor could I find much comparing oral and written accounts of the same phenomena (reasonable enough since most of the oral examples have no written accounts to compare them with). All this took me back (as many things do now that I'm old) to a book I read with great enjoyment many, many years ago -



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Duncan Grinnell-Milne *The killing of William Rufus: an investigation in the New Forest* (1968)

It explores the circumstances of the King's death and compares written and oral traditions, including the tale that the central tower of Winchester Cathedral collapsed just 12 months after the King's body was buried there "as a sign of divine displeasure". As the monkish chronicler, William of Malmesbury, wryly remarked: *it would have collapsed in any case, even had he not been buried there, because it was badly built.*



Rufus Stone



William of Malmesbury

One theme is the authenticity of the Rufus Stone:

It is hard to understand how anyone can still manage to swallow whole that ancient piece of political propaganda which Cobbett, in his *Rural Rides*, was the first to expose and which Wise so expertly contradicted ... "Many populous towns and villages and thirty-six parish churches destroyed and consumed by fire", so runs a medieval account frequently quoted ... to which Orderic Vitalis added "sixty parishes" laid waste ... Odd ... that the contemporary Anglo-Saxon chronicler, who knew the Conqueror personally and never spared him when it came to listing his evil actions – or those of his son, Rufus, for that matter – does not once refer to any supposed devastation in the area of the New Forest ... one may search the scanty records from long before the afforestation decree of 1079 to the Domesday survey of 1086 and never find a whisper concerning those legendary population centres ... The truth is that they never existed ... for the good reason that the people to fill them did not exist. The soil proves that, because ... the soil of the New Forest ... is and always has been as unproductive as any in all the south of England ...

Does the Rufus Stone really mark the site of the King's death, within a few feet either way? Can it be *proved*, with a degree of certainty demanded by historians? ... First, the documentary evidence. Of this there is very little ... it can be regarded as certain ... that the King was [not] killed ... in any other of the numerous forests of southern England, as is sometimes suggested ... and, second, that because of the time-factor ... the place where he was killed lay not more than twenty miles from Winchester ... If thereafter the early chroniclers fail to point to the exact spot it is almost certainly because, even if they knew it, they did not know how to identify it ... When it comes to a pinpoint location ... it has to be admitted that there is no early documentary evidence whatever. Nothing can be found other than oral tradition ...

... This is no ordinary tradition ... it has the strength of simplicity ... it states, clearly and as a fact, that the Rufus Stone marks the spot where stood a certain oak-tree ... It goes without saying that those who handed down this tradition ... were men of the Forest, as unchanging as their native wilderness ... just how many men, in the Malwood Walk succession, would be required to cover the considerable distance of eight centuries? ... the men in the chain were not required to pass the message down to the 20th century, but only to the 18th, to the year 1745 when



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the Stone was set up in place of the ancient oak ... the probability [is] of an oral tradition ... passing on ... from man to youth ... a lad who, grown to manhood, would in turn pass on his lore to the next boy-apprentice ... From sixty years to sixty years across the centuries, from an eye-witness surviving into the later years of the 12th to a young man in the early years of the 18th century would require rather more than ten men. Say ten men and a boy ...

... [And] there must have been many more than one line of ten men ... from all the men of the Walk ... who, in the evening of August 2nd 1100, saw the King's body at their feet, there may well have come a dozen lines of men to receive and to pass on the simple statement of fact: ... that here had occurred the one notable event in English history of which they had personal knowledge ...

Descriptions of archives cannot rely merely on the internal evidence of the records. You have to go to external sources: official publications, legislation, directories, etc. but also to contemporary accounts (e.g. diaries, newspapers) and even later histories. Judging the authenticity and reliability of these sources is always an issue. When we were registering government functions at PROV back in the 1980s, we were frequently stumped for information (especially as the description approached recent times and the sources became fewer and the noble clarity of 19th century administrative prose degenerated into self-serving sludge which was seldom informative and often incomprehensible). We had to find oral testimony from officials and make a determination about how much weight to give it and how to source it.

<<**Chris Gousmett: The story of the death of William Rufus is central to the Tudor mystery novel by C J Sansom, Heartstone. An interesting take on the story and the uncertainty of the location is covered.>>**

2023, September 18: Reconciliation, memory, and forgetting

There is widespread criticism of Britain's *Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill*. Much of the adverse comment focuses on the amnesty clauses.

Prof. Laura McAtackney argues that the Bill's immediate purpose (to end "investigations, inquests, and trials" and to grant "conditional" immunity) is an impediment to memorialisation (how the violent past is remembered) and to the use of records as part of that memorialisation which (she argues) is an attempt by the State to control history.



It is ... important to understand why this amnesty is being imposed ... it is essentially being used to address Conservative party angst about ongoing investigations, inquests and trials of British soldiers who were involved in shootings and killings that were largely



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underinvestigated during the conflict. This wider context of non-consensual imposition as a mechanism to prevent justice being served is key to considering the viability of the wider provisions of the legislation, especially in terms of how the past is remembered or ‘memorialised’ moving forward.

... if the provision to create an academic report was included in the legislation it should follow that the government would provide access to their papers – indeed it was speculated the legislation may facilitate the early opening of state archives to allow for the proposed report to be written. Such a response seems fanciful when the wider context is examined ... many of the features of the Bill [are] being marked by inbuilt political interference – including the lack of transparent process for academic appointment, lack of any reference to state papers and ultimate reporting duties to the Secretary of State [that] do not bode well for the independence of the role.

There is significant space provided for the assessment and creation of oral history, which is an important form for democratising knowledge on the recent past, but hardly one that is currently neglected and its provision does not crossover into the section on the ‘Academic Report’. In effect, oral histories are seen as one form of knowledge creation and the academic report is viewed as a separate (generally more official) one. However, the Academic Report section provides no mention of historical documentation created and maintained by the British state, never mind provisions for accessing them, to enable this output to be created. It is almost as if the state is writing itself out of those histories other than controlling how they are to be written.

Many commentators and academics have already questioned how fair and open such a process and outcome could be in terms of memorialising the past. A response from legal scholars based at Queen’s University Belfast earlier this year particularly highlighted ‘efforts to privilege work on oral history, memorialisation and academic research on the conflict is, in our view, designed to provide legal and political cover . . . [and] if enacted such proposals could do untold damage to the credibility of such work as a smokescreen for impunity’.

This is at a time when we consider what is simultaneously happening at The National Archives at Kew in London. It was reported in 2019 that the National Archives had greatly extended the closure period for the files related to state-perpetrated violence against civilians during the conflict, especially victims of plastic bullets fired by the police and/or the British Army ... From such a context, it is clear that an independent writing of the history of the Northern Irish Troubles focused on multi-sources and methods cannot be expected, access to state papers is not indicated, and at best this endeavour will deeply skew what we know about the past from the British government’s side ...

It is paramount that those of us who work with the past, and especially the politics of memory and heritage, highlight the significant problems with this legislation and do not allow it to make claims of respectability by creating palatable histories from partial records that hide the actions of the commissioning state.

2023, September 20:

<< *palatable histories from partial records that hide the actions of the commissioning state* >>???

All men having power ought to be mistrusted. [James Madison](#)

Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past. [George Orwell](#) (1984)

The [Legacy Law](#) has now received Royal Assent. Can a State controlled apparatus arbitrate truth, adjudicate memory, or be allowed to tell us what is or is not mis/dis-information? The UK Government has a view:

... the bill is an attempt to draw a line under the events of the past. Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris said ... the bill offers "a real opportunity to deliver greater information,



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accountability and acknowledgement to victims and families, moving away from established mechanisms that have left far too many empty-handed". The legislation will lead to the establishment of an Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR). The aim of this new organisation is to help families find out more about the circumstances of how their loved ones were killed or seriously injured. Self-confessed perpetrators who provide a truthful account of their actions to the ICRIR can be granted immunity from prosecution. Mr Heaton-Harris said the commission is part of a move to "build a legacy process founded on integrity, expertise and fairness".

Virtue is not always amiable. [John Adams](#) (9 Feb., 1779)

Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts. [Proverbs 4:23](#)

2023, September 21:

<<a real opportunity to deliver greater information, accountability and acknowledgement to victims and families, moving away from established mechanisms>>

... and here in Australia, the virtuous are hot to confer on [Nerida O'Loughlin](#) and her accomplices the [power to suppress](#) "professional news content":

The Albanese government has been urged to remove the "professional news content" exemption from its crackdown on misinformation on social media, amid concerns that news coverage of the voice and Covid has spread false information and lies. [Senator] Hanson-Young said misinformation was a "growing threat to our democracy, whether it's spread via large social media platforms or by large multinational media corporations, like the Murdoch media" ... the Albanese government will need the minor party's 11 Senate votes to pass the bill ... [Media law academic Michael] Douglas said the exemption of professional news content "lacks a coherent basis" ... [MP Zali Steggall] says "'Mis[information] and disinformation shouldn't be permitted in any format. Consistency is important."

Totalitarians, fearful of diversity and difference, always think "consistency is important" and they won't be satisfied until we all think as they do. God forbid!

In the broadest sense, [totalitarianism](#) is characterized by strong central rule that attempts to control and direct all aspects of individual life through coercion and repression Totalitarianism is often distinguished from dictatorship, despotism, or tyranny by its supplanting of all political institutions with new ones and its sweeping away of all legal, social, and political traditions ... The totalitarian state pursues some special goal ... Whatever might further the goal is supported; whatever might foil the goal is rejected. This obsession spawns an ideology that explains everything in terms of the goal, rationalizing all obstacles that may arise and all forces that may contend with the state ... Any dissent is branded evil, and internal political differences are not permitted ...

2025, January 2: [Original, authentic, genuine](#)

... Expectation is growing that the trustees of the [British Museum] are about to agree to the [Elgin] Marbles' return to Greece ... If the Marbles return to the Acropolis, the hole they will leave in [the British Museum](#) may be filled by perfect replicas. The Oxford-based Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA) uses robot sculptors following detailed computer scans to carve copies that are accurate to within fractions of a millimetre ... Roger Michel, the executive director of the IDA, claims to have been offered a supply of the marble [needed to] enable the IDA to create near-perfect copies to replace the ones that might be going home ...

The Marbles, which once formed part of the exterior decorations of the vast Parthenon temple, are now equally divided between Athens and London, with a handful of strays elsewhere. Their sale between 1801 and 1812 without the agreement of the Greek government, which did



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not exist at the time, has been the subject of bitter dispute since they were removed by agents acting on behalf of Georgian architectural salvage hunter Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin ...

Elgin was acting out of avarice, says Michel, when he bribed the Parthenon's Turkish overlords to let him carve up the Parthenon's frieze and cart it off. Elgin was in cahoots with the then foreign secretary Lord Castlereagh and their motive was simply to make money ... George Osborne, the former Conservative chancellor and now chairman of the museum, [has made no secret of his willingness to find an agreement with Greece](#), overriding decades of official opposition to their return. On top of Osborne's sense of urgency ... "Keir Starmer's [desire is to engage with Europe](#) in a different way to the Conservatives. The reason nothing has been announced yet is because the trustees need to sign off on any deal and no one wants to tread on their toes." "My understanding is some significant portion of the Marbles will be 'deposited' in the Acropolis Museum. No one is 'loaning' these things, no one is talking about ownership at all. They will simply be deposited in the Acropolis Museum," Michel continues ...

"They came up with the word 'deposit' because that accurately describes what is happening here. It doesn't insinuate that either party actually owns the objects. When they built the Acropolis Museum it was in anticipation of someday receiving these objects back. There are empty plinths ready for them ... YouGov polling earlier this week showed 53 per cent of people supported the return of the Marbles to Greece, with just 24 per cent saying they should remain in Britain. But opponents remain very vocal. Speaking on Sky News on Tuesday, shadow chancellor Mel Stride claimed that when they were taken into possession by the museum "it was legitimate" and they were kept very safely. "You give back the Elgin Marbles, does France have to give back the Mona Lisa to Italy? Where do you stop?" he asked.

But Michel argues that his copies would be better than the originals, with missing noses, amputated toes and mislaid fingers restored. Some of the sculptures could also be returned to their original appearance, painted in what may appear to modern eyes to be garish colours ... The British Museum has always insisted it is forbidden by its constitution from "deaccessioning" (permanently removing) any items in its collections. This is why the form of words involved in any deal over objects such as the Parthenon Marbles is so important. The Museum also insists it is a "world museum" not just a British Museum and its collections are maintained for the benefit of all humanity ...

As yet, no deal has been done to make a set of replica Marbles and display it in the British Museum. Michel claims the IDA is the only organisation with the skills, the technology and the funding in place. Watch this space.

[The Telegraph](#) (10 Dec., 2024)



"They've renamed the British Museum."

