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Documents in the Dynarchive: Questioning the Total Revolution of the Digital Archive

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Documents in the Dynarchive: Questioning the Total Revolution of the Digital Archive

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to all who have provided comments on this text, including the 2021 Document Academy conference attendees, my anonymous reviewer, and Martin Öhman.

“At both ends, the archival encounter is counter-cinematic and erratic, days of monotonous sifting and dead-ends punctuated by one or two, or maybe zero, hidden moments of vivid, peculiar joy.”

—Gabrielle Dean, “Disciplinary and disorder,” *Archive Journal*

“Google Books allowed me—in the space of three minutes at my desk, rather than a day at the library—to find out enough about African American showman William Benbow to know that I wanted to know more.”

—Lara Putnam, “The transnational and the text-searchable: Digitized sources and the shadows they cast,” *American Historical Review*

The archive as metaphor is ubiquitous today. Somehow, this daily archiving that we all do on our phones and computers co-exists with the idea of the traditional, institutional archive as a physical place characterized by dusty and aged documents, much more out of reach for the average citizen than other kinds of cultural heritage institutions. Media theorist Wolfgang Ernst has argued that digital archives can be understood much differently, as “dynarchives,” a phrase that makes their networked, fluid logic clear, and neatly contrasts with the supposed stasis of the physical archive and its hierarchical *fond* structure (Ernst 2013). This contrast is reflected in the stories scholars tell about document findability in these two archival iterations, as evidenced by the two introductory quotations (Dean 2012; Putnam 2016). Inbuilt in this contrast is an argument about the potential for, in Ernst’s words, a “decolonization” of the archive via its fragmentation into a non-hierarchical web of interrelated documents, a deconstruction that might make documents by and about historically underprivileged groups more visible and accessible (Ernst 2016).

While investigations of the effects of digitization on archives is far from new, these theorizations do not delve deeply into the interconnected and co-constitutive nature of physical and digital archives and how this relationship affects the documentality of archival materials, to use Bernd Frohmann’s terminology (Frohmann 2012, p. 174). The archive is here defined in line with Bak’s (2016) conceptualization, which argues that “Archives manage relationships, not items”, building on Luciana Duranti’s (1997) understanding of the archival bond – what transforms a document into a record – as implicated in “the physical order of the records, their classification code or their registration number” (p. 216). This definition is supplemented with Ernst’s observation that this management of relationships also entails rules for the inclusion and exclusion of material (Ernst 2013, p. 129). This article will think through how a key set of document practices central to the identity of the archive transfer (or not) between the physical and digital iterations of this institution.

As a result, the text will compare, contrast, and identify links between the archive's physical and digital iterations in three areas:

1. Hierarchical collection description versus individual document description
2. Original order versus relevance-based results
3. Archival selection practices and the illusion of completeness

These three areas are traditionally critical for maintaining the authority and evidentiary value of archival documents, covering provenance and original order as well as the archive's historical role in drawing lines between personal and public memory. All of these principles are now being transformed by the market logics of the internet and challenges from various groups that historically have lacked full representation in the archival record. It is time to have a discussion about the extent to which archival digitization actually creates a dynarchive that destroys hierarchy and original order. It is only through such an analysis that the relationship between the documentality of archival materials and the inequalities built into archives can be assessed.

Hierarchical collection description versus individual document description

Archival research is oft dramatized as a way of transcending time and space to touch unexpected traces of the dead. Yet archival research is also work. It is the "days of monotonous sifting and dead-ends" that makes Dean's "hidden moments of vivid, peculiar joy" stand out. The interdependency of these two descriptions – transcendent discovery and a muddling through – emphasize the physical relationship with old text and total immersion in collections of text as a method of understanding historical context. This immersion is central to understanding the contingencies of both the archive and the historical events and persons represented in the archive.

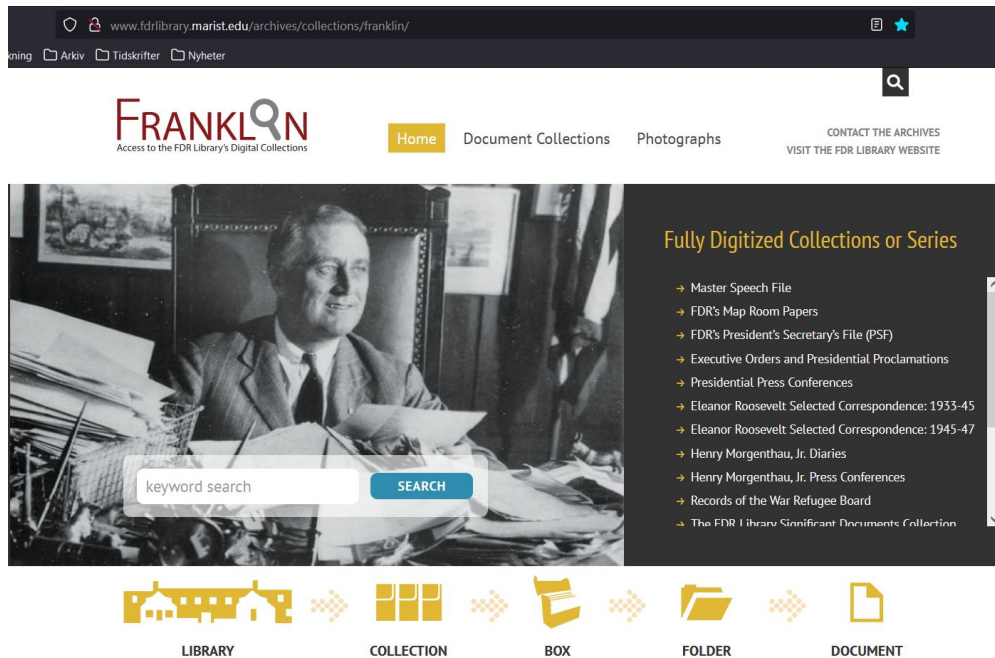


Figure 1 – The *fond* system, represented in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library Digital Collections

The expression of this seemingly unnavigable ocean of information is the *fond* system, which articulates the structure of the collection. This is a system designed to preserve “original order” or the initial working order of documents that reflects past use. The *fond* system begins at the collection level “by describing the whole” of a group of historical materials, most often based around an institution or important person/family. The system then proceeds with “a complex hierarchical and progressive analysis” that parses the collection into archival boxes and folders within those boxes, based on document content, format, and use (see Figure 1 for a visual representation; Pearce-Moses 2005, p. 26). Despite the active work that this organization involves – archivists regularly engage in culling repeat documents or materials deemed historically unimportant, organizing types of material together (for example, correspondence, financial records, or photographs), and other activities that alter the collection – the assumed neutrality of the *fond* system demands the erasure of this active organizing. Collection structure as well as content is attributed to the initial owner of the material.

Yet these choices matter. The quantity of culled material related to women and minorities cannot be known. But beyond this literal erasure, the *fond* system rarely extends description down to the individual item level, rendering historically disempowered communities found at the edges rather than the center of collections invisible. As a result, the archive is constructed with more easily findable

transcendent moments for those researching from the perspective of the powerful, while those searching for the historically disempowered are at a disadvantage.

Digitized materials upend these collection-based and top-down descriptive practices of the physical archive, as illustrated by Putnam's search process, the second introductory quotation to this article. Instead of starting with collection-level description, digital environments demand item-level description. Everything in the digital archive is a file to the user, a series of 0s and 1s to the computer – this is the key to the construction of Ernst's dynarchive. But the digital archive is not without order. Findability requires the application of structured metadata – the information added to documents to describe them, elaborate their relationships with one another, and make them findable online. Beyond enabling search, this information helps to establish the authenticity and provenance of individual items, critical for the use of these items in scholarly projects. At the same time, metadata provides multiple definitions of and routes to the same document, enabling documents to live in flexible, shifting relational contexts.

The repercussions of this new documentality for archival provenance and authenticity are not yet well-understood. Some scholars have argued that these challenges to the hierarchical *fond* system impair the archive's ability to ensure that provenance of materials – the information describing the origins, custody, and ownership of an item or collection – is maintained (Gauld 2015). Others have emphasized the opportunities for extended description that increases access to archives at the individual item-level (Yeo 2015). If fully described, digitized archival documents might be understood through the lens of "secondary provenance," which archival scholar Lori Podolsky Nordland (2004) has described as the "new meanings or layers [that] are added to the record's context and structure" (p. 154) as these materials are reinterpreted through what Hugh Taylor (1987) has called "transmedial shifts."

Yet these arguments are based on an assumption that digital archival documents break radically with original principles of *fond*-based provenance. In practice, digital archives often attempt a recreation of the *fond* structure on the web, via a first page featuring a short description of the collection focused on the collection creator, combined with the application of unique digital identifiers attached to individual archival documents that link them back to physical collections. While it is questionable whether collection-level searches are used extensively when a plethora of other search classes fit much better with the logics of the internet, this persistent identifier – a set of letters and numbers – establishes a provenance grounded in the physical collection, rather than enabling a more open, dynamic definition of provenance called for by activist archivists. Provenance on the web is directly linked to the logics of the physical archive.

Instead of representing a break with hierarchical *fond* description, the individualization of documents in digital environments is an extension and

diversification of this system. This interconnectedness is hard to see primarily because of traditional archival approaches. As Lionel Bell (1973) notes, archivists often see subject access as unrelated to provenance-based access and therefore less important; archives are built on a “tradition that records, in contrast to books and articles, are *part* of transactions rather than *about* them” (p. 285). Individual subject classification would seem to reduce the archive’s role as neutral processor of records while simultaneously providing all-too-fixed definitions of documents with multiple and varying meanings, offending both traditionalists and poststructuralists.

The remixability of digitized material is dependent on and fuels dynamism in the physical archive. Traditionally, subject classification has been applied to entire archival collections, located in finding aid indexes. In order to create the minimum metadata necessary for the findability of what often amounts to hundreds of individual documents, pre-existing subject heading lists and archival description of physical materials are often built out rather than built anew (Bak 2016). Further, digital projects that employ metadata from digital collections often necessitate going to the physical archive in search of more contextual information. This process can result in more detailed finding aids. The scope of this back-and-forth is visible in descriptions of metadata application, perhaps most interestingly with Yale’s Photogrammar project. Here, researchers combined traditional archival research and computational methods to add descriptive information to digitized photographs from the Farm Security Administration’s Depression-era public works project, which paid photographers to document and thus produce propaganda for the New Deal (Arnold et al. 2017). This research then fed back into description expansion for the physical collection.

Scholars of historically disempowered groups have criticized original order and hierarchical *fond* description for perpetuating the historical invisibility of these groups (Bishop 2017). With extensive metadata, archives could be rearranged and remade to place formerly invisible groups at the center of history (Yeo 2015). But this opportunity is frequently suppressed by a reliance on descriptive categories grounded in older archival traditions. The development of description that relates materials across the physical-digital divide does not lead to more description related to historically oppressed groups. Integrating race, class, gender, and other relationally defined concepts into archival description will require directed work at both the collection- and individual document-levels.

The coincident, intertwined development of physical and digital archival description indicates that the whole of the archival system rather than the digital archive can be understood as a dynarchive that is neither static nor revolutionary. The dynamism of the digital archive is dependent upon the processual physical archive, which provides not only material for digitization but the information necessary to provide digitized material with a trustworthy documentality. Depending on their location in physical or digital contexts, archival documents are

accessible in different but related ways, undermining the decolonization claims of Ernst. Extricating materials from original order and does not mean that the logics of these systems transform or disappear. The question then is what happens when these relational definitions and materials are set asea in the logics of the wider world web.

Original order versus relevance-based results

In descriptions of archival research, an image emerges of a researcher sitting at an archival desk, surrounded by physically ordered objects of the archive: the trolley full of archival boxes located next to a wooden desk covered with documents from one of these many boxes, a placeholder sticking out of the box in use. Researchers wade through collections, reserving boxes with ill-defined labels like “Correspondence, 1945-1957” rather than individual documents with clear and direct relevance to their research topic. Digital search is a very different experience, one that Claire Preston (2000) has astutely noted overturns previous Cartesian classification schemes built on difference, replacing them with analogy-based search. As a result, researchers are confronted only with relevant material. The consequences of this shift are clear in the contrast between Dean’s description of painstaking and often unfruitful physical archival research and Putnam’s experience of rapid keyword-based internet research. For the scholar who has been trained to assume primary source scarcity this sudden, ordered access can be very appealing.

Though much of the literature examining archival representation addresses digital archives as discrete units, relevance extends search outside the bounds of individual archives, reaching across formal institutions. Aggregate digitized cultural heritage collections make this cross-institutional search very clear. Dozens of institutions contribute materials to large digital aggregate portals like Europeana and the World Digital Library, as well as more circumscribed portals like California Digital Library or the Rossetti Archive. The understanding of archival collections as having multiple creators has been around since the mid-20th century, yet the archival principle of not assembling archival collections that mix creators or origins has persisted (Bak 2016). Making individual digitized materials findable across institutional boundaries via general search further undermines collection- or institution-specific documentality. The process of document individualization, aggregation, and relevance-based return privileges description and content of materials above information about their creators and compilers.

But the archival principle that appears to be fully undermined by relevance-based search is original order, a foundational principle that underlies archival research practices and longstanding definitions of archival authenticity (Zhang 2012). Traditionally, original order has provided a method of reading individual

archival documents within a context of historical use. This hierarchical, structural context provides documents with their evidentiary value. Such an approach is nearly impossible within digital environments that are constantly changing, as search reaches across institutional borders and archival collections expand due to digitization and contract due to obsolescence. A constantly shifting mix of documents means a constantly shifting set of relations between those documents, resulting in fluid links between items and search queries.

Archivists are currently working on how to reproduce a version of original order for digitized and born digital materials, though there is little consensus amongst archivists and researchers about how to do this. Jane Zhang's (2012) study of archivist practices revealed an array of definitions of original order for digital documents, including using the file directory system, a file classification scheme, and a metadata scheme for storage in multiple orders. Additionally, the now two-decade-old Encoded Archival Description (EAD) metadata structure is designed to preserve archival hierarchies as the basis for document definition and navigation. These approaches are, of course, limited by the very nature of digital search – a description of the archival context of the physical document embedded in the digitized facsimile does not ultimately facilitate the same kind of wade through archival messiness and context that the physical archive requires. Algorithmic relevance still reigns supreme.

Here, we appear to see some of the dynamism that poststructuralist archivy has advocated for but failed to implement structurally in the physical archive. The digital archive seems closer to Stuart Hall's (2001) ideal of the archive “an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past” (p. 92), questions that are constantly changing as we move forward in time. Certainly, placing documents in a constantly shifting set of digital relationships. But relying on contrasts between the digital and the physical iterations of the archive reduces the physical archive to a stagnant mass, rather something in a constant state of becoming, as new materials and collections are added, finding aids are updated, and the archive is used. As Eric Ketelaar (2012) has convincingly argued, the physical archive hardly prevents its documents from being shifting “[repositories] of meaning” (p. 23), boundary objects whose interpretations sit at the center of a politics of memory.

Further, replacing original order with the market logics of relevance-based search can hardly be the answer to Hall's call for archival heterodoxy. Historically oppressed groups have a history of being reduced to numbers and patterns as a way of dehumanizing them (Stoler 2002). Mistrust of mainstream archival institutions – part of the state apparatuses that engaged in these dehumanizing practices – has led many groups to establish community archives to retain control over their collections (Bastian & Flynn 2020). This same need to protect and properly contextualize has meant that many of these archives are conservative about

digitization; afloat on the internet, these documents are easily whitewashed, stripped of their loaded contexts and repurposed as if they did not have politically weighted DNA (Brink, Ducey & Lorang 2016; Odumosu 2020). The fear of toxic internet culture is not misguided, as Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) has demonstrated – to digitize historically sensitive material places this material within a new context driven by market-based algorithms and designed (unwittingly or not) to reproduce the various hierarchical systems that exist elsewhere.

All archival materials retain a documentality via their “arrangements with other things,” and this documentality is never value-free (Frohmann 2012, p. 174). Decolonization of the archive is inhibited by the replication, reuse, and decontextualization that characterize not just the internet but the physical archive. But original order, collection practices, and historical archival use also establish routes to materials that have privileged the perspectives of the powerful. All archives must grapple with how to deal with controversial or hurtful materials in the digital archive, without cleansing accessible public memory of its past sins or misrepresenting the historical nature of systemic inequalities in the process. Here, Ernst’s notion of the dynarchive is useful for understanding not just the constant changeability of the internet, where relations between documents are constantly in motion, but the changeability of the physical archive as well. The archive is a process, constantly expanding and in use – decolonizing this process is the goal.

Archival selection practices and the illusion of completeness

This constant archival growth is often depicted as a natural accumulation of the detritus of lives, an understanding reified by “total archives” systems that collect widely and inclusively (Millar 1998). And yet a fundamental building block of the archive is selection practices. This is as true of the digital as it is of the physical archives. While enormous scholarly energy has been put into examining the structures and classification systems of the archive in its physical and digital forms, the issue of selection is more opaque, resulting in a dearth of research on selection practices (Thomas, Fowler & Johnson 2017). Still, conscious or unconscious selection choices on the part of archivists determine what histories we can write and create a hierarchy of more or less trustworthy historical topics. In this way, selection determines the contours of collective memory itself.

Issues of representation in the physical archive are acute. Deborah Gray White notes that it has been difficult to convince Black women to keep and donate their materials to archival institutions. When they do so, these women often place significant restrictions on their documents, in order to control use (Gray White 1987). This tendency is related to previously mentioned concerns about contextual and definition control shared by all historically oppressed groups. But such reticence compounds the unequal power dynamics of institutional archives, which

claim historical evidentiary value for the documents they house. As Ann Stoler (2002) argues, the centrality of archive-building for colonial regimes is no accident – these institutions have understood the power inherent in archival creation.

Digitization entails a second process of selection that builds on and potentially worsens the inequalities of representation built into physical archives. Selection for digitization is notoriously untransparent, influenced by legal and economic regimes governing the internet, which themselves are shaped by systems of gendered, raced, and classed power. As Trevor Owen and Thomas Padilla (2021) point out, knowing the legal policies of the digitizing institution is key to a critical reading of the digital materials provided by the institution. On top of these rights-based delimitations, selection for digitization is often determined by a patchwork decision-making process, combining resource concerns with user requests, public-private partnerships and other collection-specific determinations (Ziegler 2019). The result of these layers of selection is not just a vastly reduced quantity of material, but collections whose contours have been shaped by the rights regimes, user practices, and market logics of the internet that are historically unfriendly to less privileged groups.

Digitized archives exist in an environment that purposefully eliminates gaps and the visibility of the edges of collections of information by filling silences with noise. Ernst (2013) notes that “Cyberspace is based on the assumption that unused space is economically wasteful” (p. 139). This is a very attractive quality for scholars used to incomplete, contingent archival research – see again the contrast between the two search processes described in the beginning of this text. But algorithmic search means that there is almost always a series of documents returned, even if the returned documents are copies of the same digitized document, reproduced in a variety of different locations on the web. Perhaps more likely is that the returned results are dominated by documents from a few large institutions that have digitized more widely marketable materials – in other words, materials with a particular societal, national profile that allows them to be marketed as canon documents.

Wolfgang Ernst (2013) has argued that “the digital archive itself has become an entity always already in flux, continuously in-formation, and its analysis requires new conceptual tools” (p. 42). But the essential formlessness and constant changeability baked into Ernst’s concept of the dynarchive applies to the physical archive as well. Multiple scholars have questioned Ernst’s theorization of archival technologies as too determinative, devoid of human choice, existing outside systems of inequality. In the case of selection for collection and digitization, this assessment appears to be correct. While “digital memory” is highly changeable and vast, it is far from all-encompassing, and one of the major problems that scholars – especially scholars of gender, race, and class – have had with archives writ large is their emphasis on the opportunities of vastness in lieu of acknowledging the

inequalities and silences that characterize this vastness (Noble 2018; D’Ignazio and Klein 2020).

Looking across the physical/digital divide

Archival scholars have always been dependent on proximity to archival sources and are thus likely to work across the divide between the physical and the digital archive because digital materials fit easily into pre-existing practices. Laura Putnam recommends, for instance, a practice of digital “side-glancing” in order to establish which hunches or leads to pursue in the physical archive, a tactic that closely aligns with other recommendations made by other archival researchers. The term “dynarchive” fits better with this set of research practices, as well as facilitating the integration of use into the conception of the archive, in line with Eric Ketelaar’s (2012) arguments about interpretation shaping the meaning(s) and use(s) of archival documents over time.

There is some evidence that digitization is impelling archivists to confront the constructed nature of the archive – be it physical or digital. But how this constructed nature is examined and how these analyses and criticisms translate into practice varies significantly for physical and digital archives. One more high-profile project is the National Archives and Records Administration’s (NARA) development of graphic “Next-Generation” finding aids, which are designed to make visible and to some extent upend traditional archival practices.¹ Yet soul-searching about the physical archive’s various silences and biases has occurred largely in the pages of journals and books as an academic conversation that fails to result in significant alteration of longstanding selection, description, and organizational practices.

¹ An announcement of these finding aids is included in the end-of-2020 newsletter from the organization, available at <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2020/12/31/a-look-back-at-2020/> (accessed 17 March 2021). Only the Bureau of Indian Affairs Photographs Finding Aid is explicitly named as a finding aid, however.

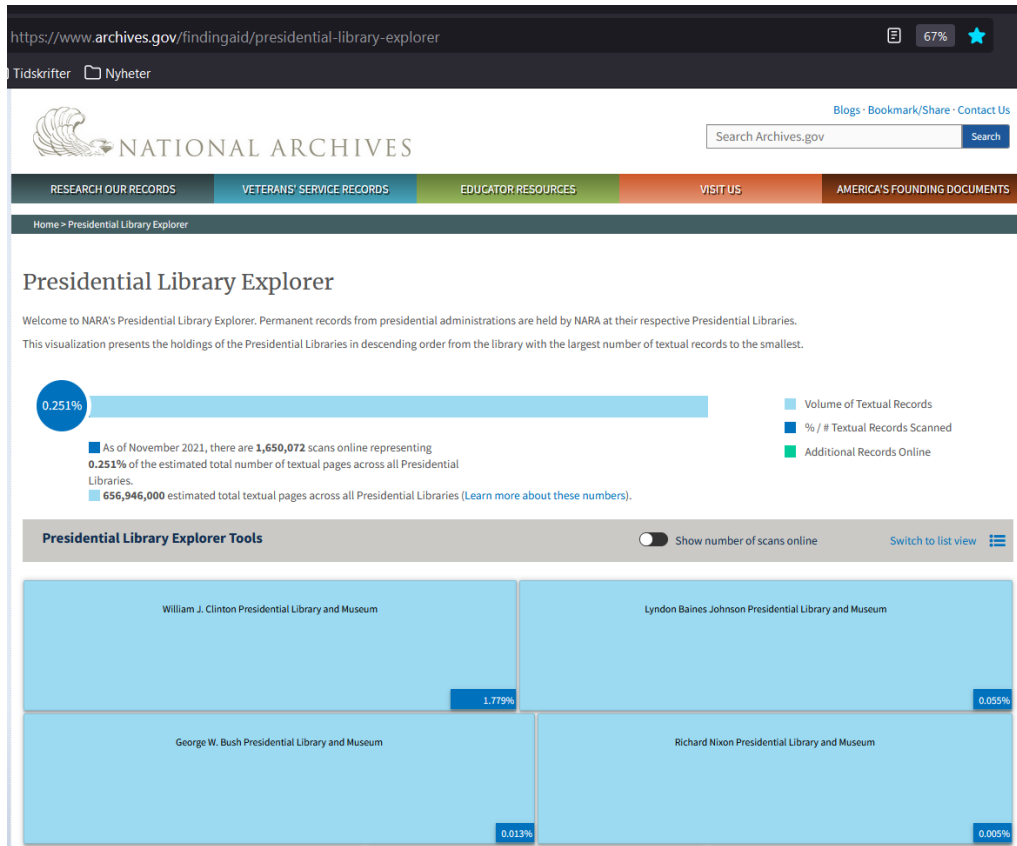


Figure 2 – The National Archives and Records Administration Presidential Library Explorer²

An examination of one of NARA’s new digital finding aids demonstrates that transparency with digital archival practices does not necessarily undermine normative understandings of physical archives as impeccable evidentiary bases. As seen in Figure 2, the structural systems at work in the Presidential Library Explorer finding aid attempt to combine networked logics and traditional archival hierarchies.

² The Presidential Library Explorer can be found at <https://www.archives.gov/findingaid/presidential-library-explorer> (accessed 30 November 2021).

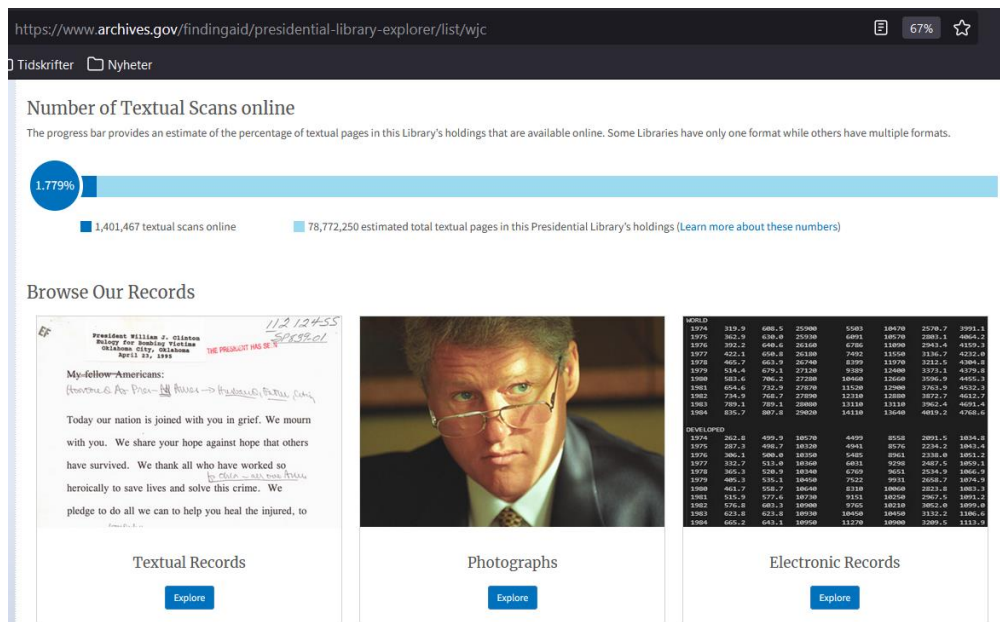


Figure 3 – The William Jefferson Clinton Digital Archive, via the Presidential Library Explorer³

The platform employs a format-defined classification system favored by networked cultural heritage institutions. Clicking on the collection for the Clinton Administration, for instance (see Figure 3), leads users to a visually oriented page that foregrounds browsing via format. The document categories of photographs, video and audio, artifacts, textual records, and electronic records are all available. Each represented by a thumbnail example record; for instance, the textual records category is illustrated with a section of a hand-edited copy of the speech made after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

³ See <https://www.archives.gov/findingaid/presidential-library-explorer/list/wjc> (accessed 30 November 2021).

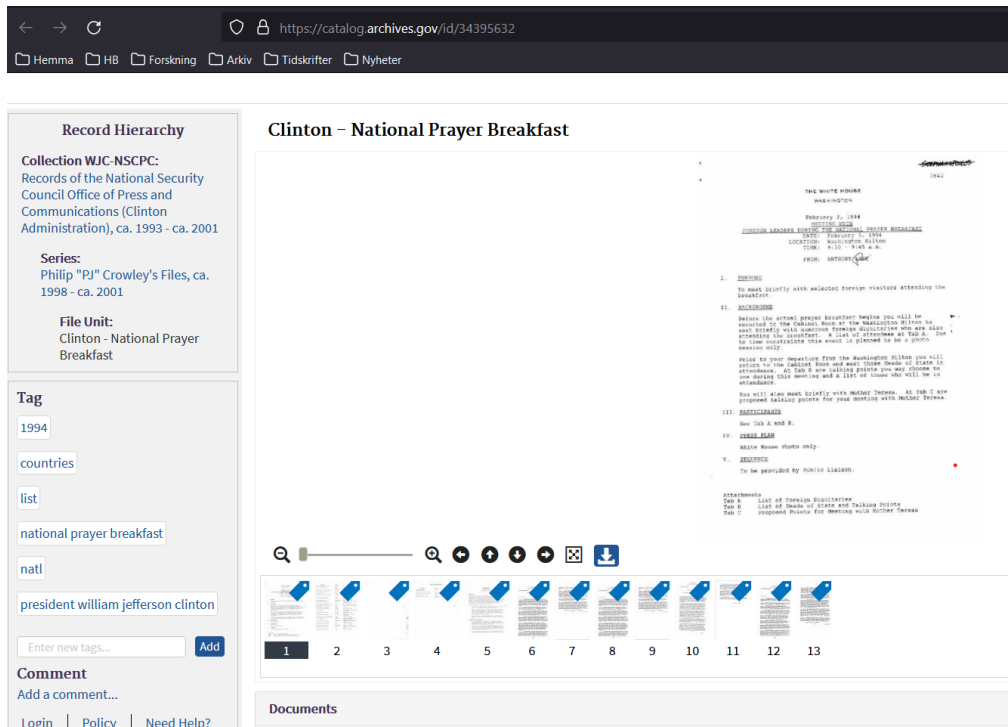


Figure 4 – An individual document view within the Presidential Library Explorer⁴

As seen in Figure 4, the interface then re-imposes a traditional archival structure after the user has accessed a specific document. Here, the left-hand menu displays the collection, series, and file unit information as the document’s “record hierarchy” while providing a click-through option that allows the user to click back and forth within the archive’s collection structure. For instance, the document “Clinton – National Prayer Breakfast” sidebar elides the difference between the physical original and the digital facsimile identifying the digital document’s location within a hierarchical physical collection. Included underneath this hierarchy are a series of tags, most of which are so broad as to be virtually useless (such as “countries,” “list,” and “president william jefferson clinton.” The collection information and a blanket copyright statement appear underneath the document facsimile. A comment function is included, providing users with a means of providing visible feedback, though it is not clear what kinds of comments are invited.

The result is a conscious reestablishment of archival hierarchy and the institutionalization of the physical collection as a baseline. Most significantly, the site foregrounds the percentage of the physical collection that has been digitized

⁴ “Clinton – National Prayer Breakfast,” <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/34395632> (accessed 30 November 2021).

alongside a total number of documents digitized. This approach explains the evolving boundaries of the digital rather thoroughly, while leaving the physical collection's boundaries untouched. The message is clear: the digital archive is a mere fraction of the physical archive (which it is), but the physical archive should be considered as complete. Further visualizations depicting the digitization of permanent federal records at the archive reinforce this sense of the vast scope of the physical archive and the tiny percentage of material available online.⁵ And yet, as NARA admits, its archivists judge the appraisal of between two and five percent of government records to meet their archival preservation requirements (Fowler 2017, p. 14).

Ernst (2013) has argued that “The emergence of multimedia archives has confused the clear-cut distinction between the (stored) past and (the illusion of) the present and thus is more than just an extension or remapping of well-known archival practices” (p. 137). This is an apt observation. Increasingly, archival researchers will be working across the physical/digital archival divide because sources will bridge the physical-digital divide. It is not yet clear how born-digital documents will disturb traditional understandings of collective memory and historical relevance, but it is clear that disturbances will occur. Digitization has demonstrated this fact and, at least momentarily, underlined the need to approach traditional archival practices with a critical eye rather than blindly reproducing archival processes that depict the archive as a neutral space while reproducing historic inequalities and power imbalances.

The archive has always been vast and uncompromisingly messy – dynamic even! – an evolving mass of seemingly unconnected remnants of lives lived and events gone by. Institutionalization in the archive has always lent an aura of completeness to housed collections, working against the visibility of that dynamism. To label one kind of archive as dynamic is to label the other stable and to separate the two as distinct entities. But this is not how researchers use the archive, and this distinction obscures the physical roots of the digital archive and the way that digital archive construction changes the organization of and routes to physical archival documents. Some archives, fearful of technical obsolescence, are struggling with how to archive born digital documents; as David Thomas (2017) notes, CD-ROMS, old laptops, and hard drives “have been processed like paper material and placed in boxes” (p. 70). While this approach is unlikely to continue, the codependency between physical and digital archival practices is unlikely to change.

Understood as a process rather than a solid thing, the digital archive extends and transforms the physical archive in a few key ways. Digital archives operate within networked systems that create new contexts for documents, but these new

⁵ The Record Group Explorer is housed at <https://www.archives.gov/findingaid/record-group-explorer> (accessed 13 April 2021).

contexts do not negate the older set of changeable contexts in which their physical originals reside. Both researchers and archivists must be attentive to these links, as well as the way in which the dynarchive has physical embodiment and is constructed out of a set of principles that have governed archives for centuries. In this reading, the dynarchive bridges the physical and the digital archive. Turning a critical, decolonizing eye to the construction of this processual dynarchive will not come naturally. It will need to be a conscious decision on the part of archivists. But this examination is critical if archives are to support both Putnam's "side-glancing" at the edges of project work and Dean's wading through the seemingly irrelevant that sits at the heart of archival projects, a slow and cumbersome journey punctuated by bursts of "vivid, peculiar joy."

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