

Open Data Open Possibilities

**The Archivist and Access:
Custodian and Guide, not Gatekeeper**

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- What is an archive? What does an archivist do, really?
- How is the archivist's role in providing access often combined with that of the records manager, and in working closely with records management and IT staff?
- How does the archivist balance the need for preservation with the need for use?
- What is the role of the archivist in providing access to records, including data sets? What does the archivist's professional core values and code of ethics have to say about providing access?
- Why do I, as an academic archivist, believe that the implementation of both an archives ordinance and an access ordinance will support the open data policy that the government of the HKSAR is pursuing?

What is an archive?

“What Are Archives?”

The word archives can be used in three different ways:

- The word archives (usually written with a lower case a and sometimes referred to in the singular, as archive) refers to the permanently valuable records—such as letters, reports, accounts, minute books, draft and final manuscripts, and photographs—of people, businesses, and government. These records are kept because they have continuing value to the creating agency and to other potential users. They are the documentary evidence of past events. They are the facts we use to interpret and understand history.
- An Archives (often written with a capital A and usually, but not always, in the plural) is an organization dedicated to preserving the documentary heritage of a particular group: a city, a province or state, a business, a university, or a community. For example, the National Archives and Records Administration in the United States, Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, The Coca-Cola Company Archives, and The Archives of the Episcopal Church are all responsible for the preservation and management of archives.
- The word archives is also used to refer to the building or part of a building in which archival materials are kept, i.e., the archival repository itself.”

What does an archivist do, really?

“What’s an Archivist?”

In the course of everyday life, individuals, organizations, and governments create and keep information about their activities. These records may be personal and unplanned—a photograph, a letter to a friend, notes toward a manuscript—or they may be official and widely shared—financial and legal documents, recordings of public speeches, medical files, and electronic records. These records, and the places in which they are kept, are called archives, and archivists are the professionals who assess, collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to these records.

The Work of Archivists

Archivists hold professional positions requiring adherence to national and international standards of practice and conduct in accordance with a professional code of ethics. The majority of professional archivists hold a baccalaureate degree, and many have one or more advanced degrees related to the profession.”

I would say that at this date most professional archivists have one or more postgraduate degrees and extensive, continuing professional education and certification in specialty areas.

How is the archivist's role in providing access combined with records management & IT policy & practice?

- In some organizations the archivist will also act as the records manager for that organization. In others they will work closely with records management staff to insure the destruction of vital but temporary records and the retention of those records with lasting historical value in the Archives.
- Increasingly this work and these collaborations involve electronic records which necessitates two things:
 - That the archivist becomes familiar with new methods for preserving and creating access to digital records and that digital archivists are not only educated but certified by their respective professional organizations.
 - That they work in tandem with both IT and records management staff to bring all of their expertise to bear on the problems of creating, preserving and providing access to digital archival collections which will sometimes include raw data sets of use to researchers in multiple new ways.

How does the archivist balance the need for preservation with the need for use?

- There will always be a dilemma for the archivist between the need for preservation balanced against the fact that there is no purpose in preserving things if they are not going to be used.
- The archivist does his or her best to walk the line between their duty to preserve our historical materials and making them available as much as is possible to as many people as possible. In many ways the digitization of hardcopy and three dimensional objects has helped us to preserve materials by making them available to a wider audience online and simultaneously removing the need for all but the most serious of scholars to touch the originals.
- Of course most of our records now are born digital and this leads us to the difficulty that electronic records are inherently unstable, not easy to authenticate, difficult to secure, and very, very expensive to preserve over long periods of time.

What is the role of the archivist in providing access to records? CORE VALUES OF ARCHIVISTS

- What does the archivist's professional core values and code of ethics have to say about providing access?
- Access and Use:
 - Archivists promote and provide the widest possible accessibility of materials, consistent with any mandatory access restrictions, such as public statute, donor contract, business/institutional privacy, or personal privacy.
 - Although access may be limited in some instances, archivists seek to promote open access and use when possible.
 - Access to records is essential in personal, academic, business, and government settings, and use of records should be both welcomed and actively promoted.
 - Even individuals who do not directly use archival materials benefit indirectly from research, public programs, and other forms of archival use, including the symbolic value of knowing that such records exist and can be accessed when needed.

Society of American Archivists' website

The Archivist's Code of Ethics

Access and Use

- “Recognizing that use is the fundamental reason for keeping archives, archivists actively promote open and equitable access to the records in their care within the context of their institutions’ missions and their intended user groups. They minimize restrictions and maximize ease of access. They facilitate the continuing accessibility and intelligibility of archival materials in all formats.
- Archivists formulate and disseminate institutional access policies along with strategies that encourage responsible use. They work with donors and originating agencies to ensure that any restrictions are appropriate, well-documented, and equitably enforced. When repositories require restrictions to protect confidential and proprietary information, such restrictions should be implemented in an impartial manner. In all questions of access, archivists seek practical solutions that balance competing principles and interests.”

Society of American Archivists’ website

What I think about the relationship between Archival & Access Legislation & Open Data Policy

- Why do I, as an academic archivist, believe that the implementation of both an archives ordinance and an access ordinance will support the open data policy that the government of the HKSAR is pursuing?
- I have been an archivist for almost 28 years. I have worked for universities that have been somewhat autonomous in their relationships with local governments and with universities tied quite closely into government ARM (Archives and Records Management) programs.
- There are advantages to both systems for universities, however I think that a jurisdiction that encourages and reinforces good ARM practices within a framework supported by legislation is not only a more successful approach in terms of saving those records needed for our enrichment (and future use) but also more successful in terms of the efficiency and savings that come with economy of scale in any endeavor.

What does the International Council on Archives say about access?

- The ICA has been promoting open access to records for many years as a part of good governance. Here are two of their statements about our obligation to provide access to records as soon as possible and as equitably as possible and the effects that good ARM programs have on our societies:
 - “The ICA believes that effective records and archives management is an essential precondition for good governance, the rule of law, administrative transparency, the preservation of mankind's collective memory, and access to information by citizens.”
 - “We therefore undertake to work together in order that appropriate national archival policies and laws are adopted and enforced;...and that archives are made accessible to everyone, while respecting the pertinent laws and the rights of individuals, creators, owners and users”

ICA website

Links to Further Information

- The International Council on Archives Universal Statement on Archives in Cantonese:
https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/ICA_2011_UDA_Cantonese.pdf
- The Society of American Archivists: <https://www2.archivists.org>
- The consultancy reports from both the Law Reform Commission's Archives Law Sub-committee and the Access to Information Law Sub-committee:
<https://www.hkreform.gov.hk/en/publications/archiveslaw.htm>
<https://www.hkreform.gov.hk/en/publications/accesstoinfo.htm>
- The International Standards Organization catalogue of standards for electronic archives and records management: <https://www.iso.org/committee/48856/x/catalogue/>

THANK YOU

