



# Preface

Archives make the future. Editors **Boris Jardine** and **Christopher Kelty** explore how archives govern us.

**VAST ACCUMULATIONS** of data, documents, records, and samples saturate our world: bulk collection of phone calls by the NSA and GCHQ; Google, Amazon or Facebook’s ambitions to collect and store all data or know every preference of every individual; India’s monumental efforts to give everyone a number, and maybe an iris scan; hundreds of thousands of whole genome sequences; seed banks of all existing plants, and of course, the ancient and on-going ambitions to create universal libraries of books, or their surrogates.

Just what is the purpose of these optimistically total archives – beyond their own internal logic of completeness? Etymologically speaking, archives are related to government—the site of public records, the town hall, the records of the rulers (*archons*). Governing a collective—whether people in a territory, consumers of services or goods, or victims of an injustice—requires keeping and consulting records of all kinds; but this practice itself can also generate new forms of governing, and new kinds of collectives, by its very execution. Thinking about our contemporary obsession with vast accumulations through the figure of the archive poses questions concerning the relationships between three things:

- 1 the systematic accumulation of documents, records, samples or data;
- 2 a form of government and governing; and
- 3 a particular conception of a collectivity or collective kind.

What kinds of collectivities are formed by contemporary accumulations? What kind of government or management do they make possible? And who are the governors, particularly in contexts where those doing the accumulation are not agents of a traditional government?

This issue of *Limn* asks authors to consider the way the archive—as a figure for a particular mode of government—might shed light on the contemporary collections, indexes, databases, analytics, and surveillance, and the collectives implied or brought into being by them. At the very least, we have demanded more precision than is found in breathless mainstream media accounts of big data: Is a database an archive? When is an index a database? How is a collection of paper records different when it comes with tiny spot of dried blood on it than when it does not? What differences make a difference when we talk about a seed bank instead

of a seed database or a repository of open access documents instead of a pirate library of scanned books? Indeed, are digital collections ‘archives’ at all—do they undermine the existence of archives traditionally conceived?

There are limitations to thinking of contemporary vast accumulations as archives: they often lack a single point of authority or intentionality. Rather than a government office, a corporate archivist, an individual collector, they span all these things—data is shared, bought and sold; samples are shipped, frozen, reproduced and mutated; digital records are collected and modified automatically or indiscriminately using procedures and algorithms that sort and filter, often in ways that trigger immediate and consequential action—from terrorist watchlists to mandatory newborn screening.

It’s not the size or the comprehensiveness of contemporary accumulations that makes them different. Archives—like the Cairo Genizah—have always been big and messy. The Cairo Genizah began with just a *rule*—an injunction to preserve any holy document, regardless of purpose. This resulted in a form of “automatic” collection—an ancient logfile, as it were, never deleted, rarely consulted, but containing valuable and no doubt “private” information of all kinds. Repurposed as a source, this archive now determines what we know about a whole era of human history, throughout much of the Mediterranean and Middle East. But did the people who used it agonize about what went into it? Did they structure their understanding or their behavior according to who might consult it: the state, historians of the future, G-d perhaps?

Similarly, archives have never been stable, unchanging supplements to government, or perfect reflections of collectives: they are dynamically constitutive of those collectives and their government. Information enters archives, but it also escapes them. The perfect total archive would leave no question unanswered, no gene unsequenced, no seed unsaved, no phone call unheard, no book unread, uncatalogued or uncited. But such perfections exist only in the fictions of Jorge Luis Borges, who, Kate Hayles reminded us, provides the limit imaginations of the archive—the Aleph and the Library of Babel.

Instead, every archive is partial, and every partial archive has its anxieties: incompleteness, redactions, mis-filings, duplications, obfuscations, ignorance, secrets. The dream of total archives governing perfectly in Borges is interrupted by the reality of total governance with imperfect archives. Like a government built around the concept of territory—with all its porous boundaries, shifting fences and walls, and undefended hinterlands—a government built around the database or archive encounters leaks, breakdowns, shifting technologies and ineffective firewalls. The case of “Digital India” shows that the simple problem of *duplication* (and the techniques of de-duplicating) troubles the system. Every attempt to combat corruption reveals new possibilities for it. Multiple databases raise the question of how to live with multiple sovereigns, or navigate between them.

Where then, does the desire for totality come from? What forms of government, and what kinds of collectives demand totality—even if a Phryric form—and what kinds resist it? The Cold War emerges in the essays collected here as a particularly fertile ground for the accumulation of masses of data, and as a key site for understanding the contemporary legacy of that archival urge. Total archives from this era span every discipline. It is the time when Alan Lomax (Laemmli) developed the study of “Choreometrics” and travelled the world in pursuit of an archive of all bodily movement; it is the time when anthropologists and psychologists could imagine a “database of dreams” that would record the inner lives of people around the world—but which ultimately became

partial pastiche instead of total archive (Lemov, p. 30). From this era comes the story of the “bombing encyclopaedia” that sought to catalogue every bombable target the US military might conceivably attack, and which now forms the basis for a generic technique of “catastrophe modelling” used in finance, disaster planning and disease surveillance today (Collier and Lakoff, p. 53). From the same period comes the story of a humble social science device: Cantril’s Ladder, used to measure happiness globally and longitudinally (“where on this ladder would you place yourself?”). Today it forms the basis of a globally significant economic indicator and measure of well-being—Gross National Happiness (Jardine, p. 48). The mid-century also saw an increase in the scientific collection of language data and blood group typing for transfusion, both of which were archives not just for preservation, but developed in order to promote, defend and study diversity around the world (Bangham, p. 43; Kaplan, p. 64). Both form the basis for new forms of biological and linguistic knowledge production (Reardon, p. 72).

All these cases from the past demonstrate that archives are never just about representation or preservation—they also perform, create, and remake collectives. They participate in governing just as much as they represent some reality or object of study. But these mid-century modern archives seem somehow quaint and controllable by comparison to those of today. Today it sometimes seems that collecting *everything* is just what we do. Why not log it? Why not keep a copy? Why not digitize it? Why not store—and share, analyse or leak—a petabyte of data every 48 hours? Costs fall and digital information properly structured can produce its own traces automatically. The ability to accumulate has outstripped the cost of or need for doing so by leaps and bounds—but unlike the Genizah, such accumulations are not singular or hidden, but duplicated, ramified, leaked and regularly consulted.

Today we can automatically log every transaction ever conducted in a particular currency—and Bitcoin is just such a global experiment. It has been imagined by a technologically sophisticated network of true believers who see not just a new currency, but a total system of governance by ledger, a transformed concept of “contracting” in which trust (interpersonal and in a sovereign) is replaced by math (Brunton, p. 83 and p. 87). Today we can imagine a perverse census at a shocking scale: two competing efforts to give everyone in India a unique number—or maybe two unique numbers—stored in supposedly safe databases whose purposes include everything from combatting corruption to delivering “services” to remaking the very composition of the collective (Cohen, p. 77). We can earnestly aim at collecting “All the World’s

Knowledge” in an online encyclopaedia including records of everything we’ve deleted or shouldn’t have kept in the first place (Binns, p. 11). And it is not just us, but the information itself that is governed today: the very demand for “open access” to all the world’s scholarship turns out to be more legitimately the work of activist-scientists schooled in the tradition of samizdat publishing than it does of a corporate giant like Google, for whom a vast accumulation has turned out to be an incredible liability (Bodó, p. 19; Murrell, p. 15).

The drive to collect everything simultaneously produces anxieties of surveillance and elaborations of vitality: at one and the same time we fear the forms of government of new and old collectivities being rendered possible by our accumulations and we insist on the impossibility of its power. We decry surveillance and intrusion, but we say: that body made of data is not me—I cannot be represented by a database no matter how total. And yet, I simply cannot function without it. The idea that the practice of governing might change in response to the availability of information is different from the accusation that power desires total information. The conspiracy theories by which privacy and surveillance activists attribute to government an unchanging desire to hoard and make secret implies a kind of sovereign power that is only part of how we govern through accumulation. But accumulations can also govern by producing new forms of discipline (Bowker, p. 40; Poleykett et al., p. 26), as well as by providing new resources for contestation, satire, resistance, or sabotage (Balasz, p. 19; Previex, p. 4). They mutate the forms of government available to everyone, but never just in the way intended, and certainly not equally.

Alongside the questions of governance and collectivities, this issue of *Limn* also stages the question of the aesthetics of the archive. Much of this work dramatizes the elaboration of vitality that accumulations can produce: the UA artists group explores different ways to index temporality, disconnection, desires both for the total, and ways to escape it. The mysterious Valaco Archive explores and extends the limit conditions that we know from Borges stories through the archives of a single, real (?) person. Fabienne Hess most directly subjects herself to the total archive, and to the seemingly infinite expanse of tiny variations. And Julien Previex dramatizes the lament of loss and partiality by collecting books that have been cut loose from the total archive, and graphically recovering the knowledge they contain. In an only half-joking way, he asks the question of the issue: what is this knowledge made from? Does it govern us now? Did it in the past? Will it in the future? ■

*Boris Jardine and Christopher Kelty*  
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