

Presentation of the Dossier Archives: Power, Ethics and Social Commitment

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Archives are more than just repositories of documents. They are powerful instruments for building collective memory and defining identities. Such influence brings with it important questions about power, ethics and social commitment that cannot be ignored. When deciding what should be remembered and what is forgotten, it influences how history is told and who has a voice in the historical narrative. Archivists, therefore, have an enormous responsibility in making decisions that can perpetuate or challenge established power structures. The inclusion or exclusion of certain documents can reinforce social inequalities or, on the contrary, give visibility to marginalized groups.

Archival ethics are fundamental to ensuring that archives fulfill their social function in a fair and responsible manner. Archivists must adhere to principles of transparency, impartiality and fairness when managing records. This involves not only faithfully preserving records, but also protecting the privacy and rights of individuals whose lives are documented. Ethics also requires that archivists recognize and address the biases and inequalities that may exist in their own practices.

Understanding that archives have the potential to be agents of social change, providing the necessary tools for accountability and public awareness, we organized this dossier, which presents thought-provoking and critical research based on different perspectives and ideas from authors of the Guinea-Bissau, South Africa, Portugal, Spain and Brazil, which examine, from multiple perspectives, the role of archives in promoting social inclusion, equity and justice.

Thus, in “One Step at a Time: Towards Inclusive Memory, Giving Voice to Silenced Athletes,” South African professors at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Mpho Ngoepe and Joseph Matshotshwane propose a transformation in the country’s archives to give a voice to its winning but silenced athletes. Based on a qualitative study, document analysis, literature review, personal experiences, visits to the Comrades House Museum and South African archival legislation, which allows the collection of private documents of public value to fill gaps from the colonial era, the authors present the project “taking archives to the people” (2014-2024). The project proposes the creation of repositories about sporting events. The collection and digitization of photographs and others will be included in the national archival repository via AtoM, accessible under the Creative Commons license. The result, similar to what happened with the collection of the Marathon Comrades event (1921-1994), demonstrates that the incorporation of sports documents, which reveal the memories of winners and their silenced voices, will lead to a transformation in the national archive system of that country .

“In search of equity and social justice in access to information: Is freedom of information ‘free’ in South Africa?”, South Africans Mpho Ngoepe and Makutla Mojapelo, professors at the University of South Africa (UNISA), assert that although the Access to Information Act (AIA) is a constitutionally guaranteed human right in South Africa, evidence shows that exercising this right requires considerable effort from ordinary citizens. This is due to the fact that obtaining information involves costs with request and access fees, as well as expenses with appeals and litigation. Using a qualitative approach, with interviews with experts using the Delphi technique and document analysis, the authors demonstrate that the cost of access to public information is exorbitant, especially for marginalized groups whose rights are violated on a daily basis. Ngoepe and Mojapelo conclude that as ordinary citizens do not have access to information, they are excluded from participating in decision-making by public bodies, contrary to what is expected in a democratic state. The authors indicate, in the conclusion, the need for the South African government to implement measures to regulate LAI rates, in order to guarantee the South African population equal access to information and make freedom of information truly “free”.

In another article, from a political and institutional perspective, professors Armando Malheiro da Silva, from the University of Porto, and Maria Beatriz Marques, from the University of Coimbra, Portugal; Cynthia Roncaglio and Shirley Carvalhêdo Franco, from the University of Brasília (UnB); Marcelo Nogueira de Siqueira, from the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), in Brazil; together with Iaguba Djalo, then researcher and coordinator of the National Public Library and Historical Archive at the National Institute of Studies and Research (INEP) of Guinea-Bissau, present the article “National Archive of Guinea-Bissau: actions and strategies for international cooperation for its creation”, whose objective is to expose the difficulties and successes achieved by public bodies and universities in these countries to create the National Archive, within the scope of the Project for the Preservation and Conservation of the Historical Documentary Heritage of Guinea-Bissau, with financial support from the Program of the United Nations for Development (UNDP), through the Fund for the Consolidation of Peace in Guinea-Bissau. Despite the challenges faced by the National Archives, due to the lack of human and material resources, the collaboration contributed to raising awareness among authorities and training qualified professionals, highlighting the importance of exchanging knowledge and experiences for archives and Archivology on a global scale.

On the other hand, focusing on social networks, “Net-activism, memory and archives: digital heritage as a tool for social justice”, the authors Maria Thereza Sotomayor, archivist at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), and Vera Lúcia Dodebei, professor holder of the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), present a relevant and engaged reflection on social activism. They carry out this theoretical and empirical analysis, based on the pages of the NGO “SP Invisível” on Instagram, which aims to give visibility to

people living on the streets. Using concepts such as biopower and heritage citizenship, and adopting netnography as a methodology, the authors propose a new approach to understanding memory, archives and heritage, which are understood not only as reflections of power relations historically established by dominant groups in social spaces, but as potential instruments of both silencing and insurgency for invisible people. One of the results of this theoretical-empirical analysis is to verify that archives can contribute to change and social justice, through the digital archiving of memories neglected and marginalized by the State and society.

From the perspective of those who decide what to keep, in the article “Social justice in web archives: considerations for (re)thinking document evaluation”, Jonas Ferrigolo Melo, PhD student at the University of Porto, and Moisés Rockembach, professor at the University Federal Government of Rio Grande do Sul, debate the intersections between archives, document evaluation and social justice. It is based on the premise that web content can be considered virtual cultural heritage or an information resource for research. The study uses a bibliographic survey on the role of archivists and document evaluation in the construction of web archives that promote social justice, in addition to analyzing ten international web archiving initiatives. The authors recognize the need to rethink web content evaluation processes, taking into account diverse cultural contexts and systemic inequalities that can result in the permanent loss of documents. They argue that web archiving must consider the cultural dimensions that influence preservation decisions. The study offers insights into assessment in web archiving, serving as a starting point for future research and reinforces the importance of web archiving as an essential tool for documenting the voices and experiences of diverse communities and promoting more democratic access to knowledge and history of these groups.

In “‘Paper’ Citizenships: power, politics and archival social accountability”, Flávio Leal da Silva, professor at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UniRio), discusses the social invisibility of documents and archives. According to the author, this invisibility is one of the main challenges in the training of technically competent archivists, socially engaged and politically aware of their role in the power dynamics arising from document management. Relying on the theoretical foundations of Archival Science and the interdisciplinarity of fields such as Anthropology, Law, Social Sciences, Social Memory, Administration, Psychology and Education, the study highlights the participation of students in their project. Silva states that students’ understanding of social phenomena, as resulting from institutional actors and varied interests, not only increases awareness of their social impact but also motivates them to seek robust education and politically engaged.

In “Arquivo Lima Barreto, a memory for the world: cultural legacy and the preservation of an underground memory”, Carlos Henrique Juvêncio, professor at the Universidade Federal Fluminense, investigates the personal archive of writer and journalist Lima Barreto (1881-1922), named as Lima Barreto Collection by the Manuscripts Section of the National

Library and elevated, in 2017, to the category of “Memory of the World” by UNESCO. The man of letters – a black, poor and alcoholic man – who unsuccessfully ran three times for a seat at the Brazilian Academy of Letters finally became “immortal”. Based on Michael Pollak’s notion of underground memory, Juvêncio argues that the Lima Barreto Collection, in addition to representing the writer, is a crucial social element for eternalizing the memory of a black person, descendant of slaves, who suffered from the prejudice of class, color and social vulnerability. The methodology used is bibliographical research, focusing on theories about personal archives and memory, in addition to an analysis of UNESCO’s Memory of the World Program. Juvêncio concludes that it is essential to bring to light the memories of different social groups that, although they make up society, are absent in memory institutions.

Looking at the teaching of Archivology in Brazil, Francisco Cougo Júnior, professor at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM) in Rio Grande do Sul, in “The teaching of Archives, Archivology and Human Rights in Brazil”, asks: Why include human rights in archival science courses? How do these courses address this topic? What are the challenges and perspectives for this teaching? Adopting the analysis of bibliographic production and current institutional documentation as a methodology, Cougo accessed information from the portals of the Ministry of Education (MEC) and sixteen federal higher education institutions, in addition to a private distance learning university center, which offer Archivology courses. The author defends the importance of this debate in the field of Archivology and human rights education and suggests two approaches to incorporating human rights into curricula: a transversal one, integrating these themes throughout the curriculum in direct connection with other content, and another concentrated one, that deals with the relationship between archives and human rights in specific disciplines.

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From a diachronic perspective, the article “Documents and social domination: some historical antecedents”, Alejandro Delgado Gómez, head of Document and Archive Management at the Diputación Provincial of Albacete, in Spain, presents an interesting and reflective work on the relationship between documents and social domination in Western societies throughout history. Accompanied by important contemporary philosophers and supported by significant examples, the author analyzes the transition from a system of domination based on control over the way in which the documents necessary for the exercise of power are produced and kept, to a change in tactics, in which the massively information. Both strategies are used as mechanisms applied by systems of domination to obtain disciplined societies. If for Weber bureaucracy is the instrument used by the administration to exercise “legal domination”, for Michel Foucault the document is the instrument of systems of domination to submit those administered. In contemporary times, the social dimension of the archive and the availability of information hide the current form of dominance.

Finally, in “The principles of access to information in transparency laws in Latin America: a source of values for the social responsibility of archives”, José Luis Bonal Zazo, professor at the Faculty of Documentation and Communication Sciences at the University of Extremadura , based on two closely related considerations: the right of access to public information is guaranteed by the obligation of public institutions to be transparent; and the principles of access to information contained in the laws are fundamental for archivists or document managers, who must comply with the obligations established by the laws. Based on these premises, the author analyzes the principles of access to information and transparency present in nineteen archive laws in the Latin American area to assess their impact on archives. The methodology applied combines content analysis and comparative analysis techniques. The author concludes that the established principles, correctly defined in their scope and limits, will contribute to improving the activities of archive professionals and strengthening social responsibility.

Considering that the social commitment of archives is the dimension that connects their power and ethics to the practice of promoting the common good, the articles in this dossier make it clear that archives must contemplate the identity diversity of society, guarantee equal access to information and support the causes of social justice. This includes several initiatives, exemplarily addressed here, that can make a difference in the construction of more inclusive and socially fair archival policies and practices.

Have an enjoyable read!