

MOVING ACROSS, MOVING BETWEEN, MOVING  
FORWARD  
EQUIPPING THE ARCHIVAL PROFESSION FOR A WORLD THAT IS  
BOTH COMING TOGETHER AND COMING APART

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**ABSTRACT**

*Drawing on the author's own experiences working within different national and professional spaces, this essay contemplates how the divides, disparities and diversities that exist within the geopolitics and infrastructures of the world today also have implications for the information and memory professions. It offers examples of how lack of mutual understanding of diverse archival traditions, as well as language considerations, can cause professional divides and power disparities in the archival field that in turn can confound the field's own ability to play a critical role in tackling divides and disparities at a societal level. It concludes by suggesting that academic exchanges, critical professional education, and scholarly venues such as the University of Zadar Summer Schools can play important roles in identifying and ameliorating these divides and disparities and in equipping the archival profession to contribute effectively in a world that is simultaneously coming together and coming apart.*

## Introduction

Many years ago, a Dutch archival colleague told me a story about when he had been helping the newly created State Archives of Croatia to develop strategies for how they would cope with records being created on bureaucratic electronic recordkeeping systems. Since my colleague did not speak Croatian and the person he was working with in Zagreb did not speak Dutch, they each enumerated the many and varied languages with which they were familiar. They found that they shared only one common language – Ancient Greek – with which they had to make do as they worked. Before my first visit to Croatia, I had regarded this story as amusing and likely apocryphal, but upon traveling to Zadar for the first time in 2008, I quickly realised the limitations of my own language abilities when I connected with my Croatian archival colleagues.

During that trip, Mirna Willer, Tatjana Aparac- Jelušić and Srećko Jelušić and I worked on developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the University of Zadar's Department of Information Sciences and UCLA's Department of Information Studies, of which I was Chair at the time. The Department of Information Sciences had been established in 2004 and was in the process of developing new areas of specialization that had been identified as particularly relevant for Croatia's national and scholarly interests. These included archivistics, a strength of UCLA, and information organization, a strength of both departments bridging the archives, library and museum (ALM) fields. The proposed relationship actually had much deeper roots in the prior interactions between the principals, including UCLA Dean emeritus Robert Hayes. All were distinguished scholars in their own areas of expertise, and all had considerable experience in working transnationally. Both universities agreed to work together on initiatives of mutual interest, most immediately those relating to developing professional education at the University of Zadar and furthering state-of-the-art research in the archival and written heritage fields. With the MOU in place, I returned to Zadar a year later to participate in the Summer School in the Study of Old Books, organized at the University by Mirna Willer with the assistance of Marijana Tomić. The transdisciplinary, transnational and transcultural orientation of the Summer School established this approach as an integral characteristic of the subsequent series of summer schools and conferences addressing different aspects of written heritage and memory that Mirna initiated and the three of us jointly organized. In that first School, European and American scholars from multiple disciplines traced the movement and social life of books

across Western and Eastern Europe and around the Mediterranean through the remaining documentary traces. They illuminated the role of commerce and trade routes, and the fact that books were often valued more as commodities than as carriers of knowledge. In so doing, they collectively pieced together a picture that was much bigger than what could be seen by looking from the perspective of any one country or field. At the same time, Croatian scholars introduced other participants to the central role played locally by written and print heritage, especially as propagated through the Church and Glagolitic script, in the formation of a distinct Croatian heritage and identity. Presentations on new cultural history, conceptual models for the organization of information, and digital projects placed the study of old books firmly in the twenty-first century. To me, that School became something of a metaphor for contemporary Croatia – old, new, exceptional, yet also situated at a longstanding geographic and intellectual crossroads between west and east, north and south within Europe – an intriguing location from which to consider boundary crossing between nations, cultures, intellectual history, and information practices. But as I listened to the discourse among the old book scholars, I was struck by something else – in a digital era where English is increasingly viewed as the *lingua franca*, the shared language of scholarship among this community remained Latin.

I don't bring up these two stories simply to acknowledge the Summer Schools, although together with their published proceedings they have made exemplary contributions to bridging regional, linguistic and disciplinary divides, cross-informing disparate bodies of knowledge, and educating new generations of professionals and researchers. Rather, I want to use this short essay to provoke a wider contemplation of how the divides, disparities and diversities that exist within the geopolitics and infrastructures of the world today also have implications for the information and memory professions, and how academic exchanges, critical professional education, and research venues such as the Summer Schools play important roles in identifying and ameliorating them.

Information and communications technologies are perhaps the most important drivers in supporting commercial, bureaucratic, scholarly and social infrastructures around the world. Nevertheless the persistence of inequalities in access to, and literacy with these technologies are well documented contributors to global and local digital divides (Pew Research Center, 2019; World Literacy Foundation, n.d.). Digital divides exacerbate and are exacerbated by other kinds of tensions and growing divides, for example, by geographic region, socio-economic status, language, ethnicity, religion, age and immigration status (BBC,

2018). Some of the most prominent tensions occur today when global and hegemonic interests, values, languages and practices threaten to overpower or undermine those of small or recently independent nations and under-represented communities. These tensions are heightened by growing distrust in digital entities that provide or collect information and contestations over histories and narratives – two concerns that are of immediate relevance to the information and memory professions. Furthermore, politics of exceptionalism and populism on the one hand and demands to ensure voice and eliminate silences and gaps regarding minority and oppressed populations on the other have placed the information and memory professions and their activities in the crosshairs of national as well as professional debates about whose narratives and documentation are valued as well as how they are represented. These debates in turn raise important questions about how and the extent to which these professions can reinvent their appraisal, description, preservation and dissemination practices to support self-determination, self-identity and shifting generational and political perspectives in multiple and diverse communities; and how they then would reconcile these practices with the wider goals of interoperability and universal accessibility of those resources.

To address these questions requires recognizing existing professional divides and disparities that are embedded, often implicitly, in institutional and national priorities, knowledge gaps about other professional traditions and pressure points, publication practices, ethical stances, and even in activities that *prima facie* are designed to overcome divides, such as standards development and professional education. This is certainly the case in the archival field, where economic, political, demographic and research priorities of nations and scholarship saturate not only contemporary archival practices, technological implementations, and ethics, but also their histories and aspirations. Archival institutions in the West were strongly called to task in the 1970s and 1980s for elitism and bias (Quinn, 1987), and have been again more recently by leaders in the surging community archives movement (Flinn et al., 2009; Caswell et al., 2017).

Taking my cue from the *Principles on Public Access in Libraries* endorsed by IFLA in 2015, I would argue that the archival field has a critical role to play in diminishing global as well as local divides and disparities through deployment of robust digital information and recordkeeping systems and practices that simultaneously ensure the accountability of governments, promote mutual understanding of local conditions and practices, and consciously sustain local

cultures, communities and knowledge. How then should we equip the archival field to be best positioned to address its own divides and disparities so that it can come together in the most effective ways to perform this role in a world that is simultaneously coming together and moving apart? In my mind I parse this problem space into several clusters of considerations: “moving across” (e.g., across languages, legal systems, political systems, institutional types, media types), “moving between” (e.g., between different professional conceptions and practices, competing community interests and rights claims, contested histories), and “moving forward” (e.g., through robust education, informed ethical stances, sound economic planning, and applied research).

Substantively addressing all of these considerations is beyond the scope of this short essay, so instead I will illustrate my argument by providing a few illustrations of how language can surface or cause professional divides and power disparities in terms of moving across, moving between and moving forward.

### **Overcoming language barriers**

Information infrastructures that knit the world together need to be able to cross geographies, jurisdictions, cultures, genres and media. Coping with linguistic difference is one of the most obvious challenges in so doing. Information professionals, especially those involved in the development of metadata schemes and mappings, are very aware of the need also to account for the diverse and dynamic semantics and grammars that underlie language usages in terms of information resources; and in time automatic translation and machine learning will play greater and greater roles in making digital information resources and metadata accessible to more people, regardless of the original language of those materials.

I want to dig a little deeper, though, and identify some additional challenges that language and language politics raise for the archival profession. It is no revelation that even within individual language spaces such as English, French or Spanish there is considerable variation in language. But what about the professional terminology that is used within those language spaces? How and why does it diverge, and when it is the same, does it always mean the same thing? I will take as examples two terms that are fundamental to the archival field and to international descriptive and records management standards – *archives* and *records*. The working groups and technical committees that devise professional

standards typically do so working in English and other major languages. There is another reason for using English beyond its status as a de facto *lingua franca*, however, since it presents standards developers with some of the most complex considerations. Leaving aside that both “records” and “archives” are themselves contested concepts within the archival field and across the humanities and social sciences, the most obvious consideration is that different professions use these terms differently (e.g., to refer to old computer files or as music recordings). Less obvious perhaps is that in some countries or archival traditions there is only one word to express both terms because the language that is used is less rich or because the nature of archival practice within that tradition has not required that there be two different terms. Even less obvious is that the terms are variously conceptualized *within* the English-speaking archival profession itself. Their meanings may overlap, thereby reinforcing that records and archives in bureaucratic contexts are usually understood to be the same thing; or each term may primarily represent different moments in the life of the resource (e.g., active record, preserved or archived record). The reason for this kind of divergence in meaning has to do with different professional conceptions of when the archival function begins – is it when a record is first created by a recordkeeping system, when a record is recorded in a registry, or when a record crosses the archival threshold and is accessioned by an archival repository? Even more tricky is that the term “record-keeping” or sometimes “record keeping”, as used in the archival traditions of the US and the UK, adheres to record lifecycle conceptualizations and refer to the acts of creating and maintaining records as part of bureaucratic and sometimes records management activities (Shepherd and Yeo, 2003). By contrast, “recordkeeping” (without a hyphen or space) in the Australian tradition refers to the records continuum conceptualization that no distinction be made between active and archival in term of the creation, management, and use of records and that all of these activities are continually interacting components of the keeping of records (McKemmish, 2017). The latter conceptualization takes its cues from the ways in which registry systems function as well how records are interactively created and used in the digital world. Such conceptual differences in meanings, therefore, may defy direct translation into other languages and may also require explanatory definitions even within the same language. Moreover, translation is not the only moment at which meaning can be lost – something as apparently straightforward as the editorial conventions to which a journal adheres can also eliminate nuance (e.g., when a journal’s conventions do not permit hyphenation of compound nouns and

conflate record-keeping and recordkeeping).

Such conceptual divergence in turn propagates confusion across other professional terminology. The term “appraisal”, for example, is very differently conceptualized in the Australian records continuum and US lifecycle-based archival traditions (referring respectively to deciding at the point of recordkeeping system design which records should be created and captured vs. deciding which records already created likely will have archival value once they are no longer actively used by their creators). Likewise, some archival traditions understand appraisal as meaning deciding what to keep (e.g., in Germany and Italy), and some use it to refer to deciding what to eliminate (as in the US and UK). This means that even an explanatory note in a standard may not be sufficient to disambiguate usage. Needing to translate the term complicates matters further and often requires probing into the lineage of an archival tradition. For example, the Croatian word for appraisal is *valorizacija*, which is often explained as being taken from Italian usage. However even though *valutazione* should be the corresponding term, Italian archivists actually use *selezione*, perhaps because of their adherence to records lifecycle approaches and the influence of broader American ideas about appraisal and selection. However, given that the ISO 15489-1 records management standard now defines appraisal through a records continuum lens as “the process of evaluating business activities to determine which records need to be created and captured”, the term *selezione* no longer fits and possibly *valutazione* would perhaps indeed be the more appropriate translation.<sup>1</sup> This raises another interesting question about whether standards promote new practices, impose other tradition’s practices, or reflect existing practices, and what each of these might mean for the conceptual and artefactual aspects of professional terminology in a given language. As with the term “record”, it should also be noted that in none of these archival usages is appraisal intended to mean assessing an item for its fiscal value, which is the most frequent usage in common parlance.

Disparities in power also show up through language. Although France, Germany and Italy all have prominent and long-standing archival education programs, the largest growth over the past three decades has been in those that are English-speaking (this would include the Netherlands and Scandinavia), and some 38 American universities now offer post-graduate degrees or specializations in archival science or archival studies. These programs also have been hubs

1 I am grateful to Giovanni Michetti for his help with thinking through this example.

of research. As a result, many new frameworks, conceptualizations and terms have emerged in English – one of the world’s richest and most flexible languages – that are catalysing new directions in the field but that may have no conceptual, terminological or indeed juridical equivalence in other traditions or languages. Although there are robust bodies of professional literatures in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Russian and Chinese, these are largely untranslated into other languages and publications in English have become the most important venues for disseminating new thinking and practice in the field. As already discussed, the amount of new terminological coinage in English, coupled with increasing divergences in conceptualization have now exceeded the capacity of this literature to carry innovations easily across other regions, especially where countries lack substantive archival education programs that might further explain these innovations to students. In countries with minor languages, where academics and other researchers are required or incentivized to publish in English or other major language venues, rather than in their own language, other kinds of divide can develop. Practitioners may not read professional and research literature in languages other than their own, or they may not be able to access it because of paywalls or government policy, and thus are distanced from learning about new developments in the field.

To appreciate such complexities, archival educators, standards developers and translators have to know the parallel terminology in another language, where one exists, and also need to understand when conceptual or practice differences has resulted from, or may in future result in a divergence in how the same term is used in another professional tradition, jurisdiction or language. They need to understand that professional terminology itself is a cultural as well as a linguistic artefact. The rich lineage of terminology may, for example, reflect colonial imposition, Common or Civil law understandings, bureaucratic or religious practices, or political ideology. It is tempting to try to resolve these issues through imposing some universal terminology, and indeed various multilingual glossaries have been developed that are more or less cognizant of these differences. However requiring universal terminology runs the risk of reinforcing historical and creating new inequities within the field, as well as of flattening the cultural contingency of different archival traditions, quashing meaningful local difference, creating false equivalencies, and generating new confusions by imposing externally conceived terms. At the same time, professionals in each country need to work to ensure that their own traditions are well understood and well represented when standards are being developed,

terminology is being set or concepts and practices are being explained. Because of resources, politics or language, it can be difficult for smaller countries or particular communities to get a seat at the table, or to communicate with one's peers at such key moments. Moreover such communication requires a sound understanding of one's own tradition, practices and terminology and how they have evolved to be as they are. Otherwise it is not possible to ensure that what should be retained as the field standardizes and evolves and what could be modified or given up actually is fully taken into consideration. That understanding, in turn, requires a solid professional grounding in one's own profession and the different traditions at work elsewhere.

### **Building mutual understanding and awareness**

Immersive experiences in professional environments other than one's own, whether through position exchanges, Fulbright fellowships, faculty research leaves or other arrangements are important mechanisms for learning to see beyond one's own professional or national domain while at the same time coming to understand its limitations and underlying assumptions. Comparison surfaces hard, but important truths, and nothing brings home the contingencies and privileges of one's own domain more effectively than spending time in another. Through my experiences first as an international practitioner and academic in the United States, and subsequently working with colleagues in Australia, China and especially in Croatia and other countries emerging out of the former Yugoslavia – all countries with very different archival traditions, histories, professional infrastructures, political conditions and demographic compositions – I have been confronted by a diversity of archival traditions, local pressures, professional expectations and knowledge gaps that may be understood or transparent within their own context but that divide parts of the archival field off from each other and impede its ability to be a more effective presence on the world stage.

Not everyone has the ability to take advantage of such experiences, however, and this is where I would return to the importance of events such as the Summer Schools that strive to diminish academic hierarchies, and disciplinary and professional silos and introduce participants to a range of national and community understandings. They are an important reminder that our information and cultural heritage is in fact highly interconnected, of why it is important to be able

to put it together to create a bigger picture, but also of why we need to be careful not to submerge difference and nuance. Such events not only showcase new ideas developed in other places and fields, they also bring the developers of those ideas into a new complex space, which in turn may lead them to further refine their ideas to account for those complexities. Finally, they can build a body of state-of-the-art literature that is also accessible in the local language (the University of Zadar Summer Schools published peer reviewed papers in English, but included substantive summaries in Croatian) and inculcate the professional obligation of writing, editing, peer reviewing and research in practice.

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# KRETANJE KROZ, KRETANJE IZMEĐU, KRETANJE NAPRIJED

## PRIPREMA ARHIVISTIČKE PROFESIJE ZA SVIJET KOJI SE ISTOVREMENO UJEDINJUJE I RAZDVAJA

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

*arhivistika, stručno obrazovanje,  
standardi, ljetne škole,  
terminologija*

### SAŽETAK

*Oslanjajući se na iskustva stečena radom u različitim nacionalnim i stručnim prostorima, autorica u ovom eseju promišlja o tome kako podjele, nejednakosti i različitosti unutar geopolitike i infrastrukture današnjeg svijeta imaju posljedice i na profesije povezane s informacijama i sjećanjem. Daje primjere kako nedostatak međusobnog razumijevanja različitih arhivskih tradicija, uključujući jezične komponente, može uzrokovati stručne podjele i razlike u moći u arhivskom području što zauzvrat može smanjiti sposobnost samog područja da odigra ključnu ulogu u rješavanju podjela i nejednakosti na društvenoj razini. Završava zaključkom da akademske razmjene, kritičko stručno obrazovanje i znanstvena događanja poput ljetnih škola Sveučilišta u Zadru, mogu imati važnu ulogu u identifikaciji i smanjenju tih podjela i nejednakosti te u osposobljavanju arhivske struke za učinkovit doprinos u svijetu koji se istovremeno ujedinjuje i razdvaja.*