Remembered History, Archival Discourse, and the September 11 Digital Archive[1]

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Abstract: This paper reviews the archival context of a memory-based digital archive and describes a new discourse of archival control over records generated as a deliberate effort of documenting remembered history in the digital age. Through a thorough review of the use of a digital archive to capture remembered history, the paper presents the case for this new archival discourse, distinctly expressed in three components – formation of collections, nature of records, and pattern of representation.

Introduction

The memorialization of the September 11, 2001 was impromptu and spontaneous. To reflect their remembrance, people constructed homemade, temporary memorials at the crash sites, produced oral and written testimonials, and created commemorative exhibits and designs.[2] How to document, collect, and present the September 11 memory has since then become an enormous challenge to historians and information professionals. One of the successful efforts was the September 11 Digital Archive,[3] a digital collection based on private memories that the general public articulated "in their own voices."[4] The project was proposed to target "the larger framework in which most people experienced these events," and in particular, "the attitudes and perspectives of ordinary citizens, especially those deeply affected by the attacks who were not necessarily inside the buildings but whose lives were profoundly affected by what happened there."[5]

This study is an intellectual inquiry of the relationship among memory, history, and archives demonstrated in this digital presence. It argues that a new archival discourse is needed to guide archival practice in incorporating both recorded and remembered history. When the remembered history is recalled and collected digitally, what kind of new archives are constructed? How does this new archival experience differ from traditional archival theory and practice? If memory-based digital archives offer a new archival model, how can we describe that new model? The study addresses these questions by conducting a case analysis of the September 11 Digital Archive. The analysis is preceded and framed by a theoretical hypothesis that when history is remembered rather than documented, traditional archival theory and practice is challenged to maintain its relevance in preserving historical evidence for future generations.

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[2] Elizabeth L. Greenspan, "Spontaneous Memorials, Museums, and Public History: Memorialization of September 11, 2001, at the Pentagon," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2003): 129–132.

[3] "The September 11 Digital Archive," http://911digitalarchive.org/ (accessed March 28, 2008).

[4] Barbara Abrash, "Digital Democracy, Digital History: 9–11 and After," *Radical History Review* 93 (Fall 2005): 98.

[5] Stephen Brier, "The Intentional Archive: Why Historians Need to Become Archivists (or Begin to Think and Act Like them)," 5. http://www.thehenryford.org/research/publications/symposium2004/papers/brier.pdf (accessed March 28, 2008).

Background: Remembered vs. Recorded History

Historian John Lukacs introduced the notion of remembered history in his book *Historical Consciousness or the Remembered Past* published in 1968. In this book, he states that "history is the remembered – and not merely the recorded – past."[6] The fact that the past can be recorded and remembered explains why historians are able to study the past through the lens of "record" and through the lens of "memory."[7] The recorded past is that part of history that has left its own marks in the course of its creation, such as museum artifacts excavated or collected from historical sites, and archival records accumulated as by-products by individuals, corporations, and government agencies in the normal course of life and business. Remembered history, on the other hand, includes "second-hand accounts of the past" and "relies on eyewitness and other recollections,"[8] and it is "the historical signature of our own generation."[9]

John Lukacs's notion of remembered history is based on his understanding of the evolution of historical consciousness since its first emergence in the eighteenth century. Lukacs explains that the evolution of historical inquiries may have gone through three phases of development, i.e., the narrative past in the eighteenth century, the recorded past in the nineteenth century, and the remembered past in the twentieth century.[10] In the eighteenth century, history was written and read as literature. People were interested in the narrative side of history – what was understood and described. In the nineteenth century, history was examined and scrutinized as science. The research focus shifted from what was narrated by people to what was recorded in first-hand historical materials. In the twentieth century, history was studied as a form of thought. The research focus shifted to what people remembered about the past through their personal experiences of historical or commemorative events. According to Lukacs, history as the remembered past is "a much larger category" than history as the recorded past.[11]

According to historian Jay Winter, the twentieth century was known for its two major memory booms.[12] The first generation of the twentieth-century memory boom "spanned the years from the 1890s to the 1920s" and the remembrance of the First World War "was a very significant part of this movement." The second memory boom emerged in the 1970s and the 1980s and "was in large part a form of remembrance of the Second World War and the Holocaust."[13] Collective memory emerged as an object of scholarly inquiry in the early twentieth century during the first memory boom – Hugo von Hofmannsthal used the phrase in 1902 and Maurice Halbwachs started to expand the concept from the psychological field into the social realm in 1925, as reported by Kerwin Lee Klein.[14]

Foundation of Archival Discourse

The shift of historical inquiries in the nineteenth century had a direct impact on the development of archival science. Traditional archival discourse was first constructed in the mid-nineteenth century when historical consciousness was framed as a methodical science. This method of inquiry studied history as the recorded past and associated the meaning of history with the meaning of records. If historical truth

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6 John Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness or the Remembered Past* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 32.
7 David W. Blight, "Historians and 'Memory,'" *Commonplace* 2, no. 3 (April, 2002). http://www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-03/author/ (accessed May 1, 2008).
8 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign County* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 213.
9 Winter, *Remembering War*, 51.
10 Lukacs, *Historical Consciousness*, 22.
11 Ibid., 33.
12 Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).
13 Ibid., 18.
14 Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representation* 69 (Winter 2000): 127.

could be revealed through historical records, the value of records as historical evidence should be assured, not assumed. It was no accident that conscious archival efforts were made in several countries in Europe in the nineteenth century to develop new methods to preserve and present the historical value of records. As Schellenberg points out in *Modern Archives*, "[b]efore the 19th century no general principles of archival arrangement had been developed in Europe."[15] With the basic principle of *respect des fonds* formulated in 1841 in France and the principle of provenance developed in Prussia in 1881 and finalized in the Netherlands in 1898 with the publication of the famous Dutch manual for archival arrangement and description,[16] archival principles were formally articulated and generally accepted. The Dutch manual was translated into German in 1905, Italian in 1908, French in 1910, and English in 1940, and "became a bible for modern archives."[17]

Traditional archival discourse exemplified in the principle of provenance has rich implications for modern archival practice. Records preserved in their original contexts are products out of organic accumulation, not out of artificial collection. Archivists generally exert no control over what is created and in what manner it is kept. Materials considered archival are created and accumulated to accomplish their primary purposes, rather than to satisfy their secondary research uses. Archival contents should be dated in the past tense – causes or results of past events, not recollections or afterthoughts. Archival records are expected to come to the archives in the order and context they were used in the first place. If the original order and context are not obvious, they should be recreated to reflect the archival principle, not reorganized according to other classification rules. The legitimate task of the archivist, therefore, is "to make a representation of the original context, so that researchers will be able not only to retrieve information, but above all to interpret the information in the original, administrative, and functional context."[18]

The memory boom of the twentieth century and the development of historical inquiries on remembered past seem to create a new condition of records formation that challenges the fundamental core of traditional archival discourse, i.e., preserving historical evidence by maintaining the natural course of production and accumulation of archival records. This new condition generates records that document the "present representations of the past"[19] rather than natural traces of the past. When history is retrospectively represented rather than concurrently recorded in its natural course, traditional archival contexts are simply not there for archivists to maintain to safeguard historical evidence. A new archival discourse, therefore, needs to be formed to guide archival practice that embraces not only recorded history, but also remembered history.

The September 11 Digital Archive

The September 11 Digital Archive is a memory-based digital repository funded by a major grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and organized by the American Social History Project at the City University of New York Graduate Center and the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. It was initially designed as a digital space for the public to deposit its recollections of experiences in the aftermath of the disaster. From January 2002 with the initial version of the project website to September 2003 when the Library of Congress formally accepted it into its digital collections, the September 11 Digital Archive accumulated more than 130,000 written accounts, e-mails, audio recordings, video clips,

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[15] T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 169.
[16] Ibid., 170–175.
[17] Ibid., 175.
[18] Peter Horsman, "Taming the Elephant: An Orthodox Approach to the Principle of Provenance," in Swedish National Archives, *The Principle of Provenance: Report from the First Stockholm Conference on Archival Theory and the Principle of Provenance, 2–3 September 1993* (Stockholm, 1994), 58, 60.
[19] Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory," 133.

photographs, Web sites, and other materials.[20] As a deliberate effort of digitally capturing memory and remembrance, the Archive demonstrated a unique experience, as reflected in the formation of collections, the nature of records, and the pattern of representation.

Formation of Collections

The memory-collecting process of the September 11 Digital Archive project started with the development of the project theme. To fill up a documentation gap, the project team decided to develop a theme that would capture "a broad canvas of Americans' experiences for the historical record of 9/11"[21] and cover a "larger political, social and economic meaning."[22] They targeted not only those who witnessed events but also those who experienced aftermath, so that future scholars and researchers would be able to "reconstruct what happened, why it happened and how diverse people were affected by what happened and how they interpreted the events that they either participated in or witnessed that day."[23] They made efforts to identify the areas that were not fully represented in the official and mainstream media and looked for a larger framework that would reveal "how ordinary people experienced 9/11, how it shaped their subsequent behavior and beliefs, and how they came to interpret the meaning of those events in their lives and for the nation and world."[24]

To capture a broad canvas of Americans' experiences requires a plan to build an extensive records community. Traditional archives usually advocate a close relationship with records creators. The relationship can last for the duration of the lifecycle of records or throughout the records continuum. The project team aimed at collecting records that document what people remembered, recollected, communicated, or felt about the 9/11 tragedy. For such a volatile and far-flung records community, traditional archival collection development models such as records management and donor relations programs may not apply. The project's goal was to systematically solicit memory-based digital artifacts from voluntary contributors. As a team member commented, "the entire project would have been an exercise in entropy if we had failed to attract contributing visitors."[25]

The project website was launched in January, 2002, three months after the attacks. The project team spent another three months "testing design and accumulating a critical minimal mass of entries" through personal connections. Two strategies were adopted after the six-month anniversary in March 2002. One was regional and national media coverage and the other was local community outreach. However, "after the publicity had faded and the funding for community involvement dried up", the crucial approach to building a sizable and sustainable community of contributors was to establish "strategic partnerships with institutions whom our potential contributors both trusted and visited or interacted with in some fashion."[26]

In discussing collecting efforts made in the project, the team members consider a broad range of partnerships with allied institutions the most efficient outreach method. The September 11 Digital Archive collaborated with the National Museum of American History (NMAH), the Library of Congress, American Red Cross Museum, the Museum of the City of New York, the City University of New York Graduate Center, the Columbia Oral History Project, the Middle East and Middle East American Center,

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[20] "News from the Library of Congress: Library Accepts September 11 Digital Archive, Holds Symposium," August 15, 2003. http://www.loc.gov/today/pr/2003/03-142.html (accessed May 1, 2008).

[21] James T. Sparrow, "On the Web: The September 11 Digital Archive," in *Public History: Essays from the Field*, ed. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia, revised edition (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 2004), 402.

[22] Brier, "The Intentional Archive," 5.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 6.

[25] Sparrow, "On the Web," 407.

[26] Ibid., 409.

groups and communities in the three crash sites, and other organizations and institutions.[27] The significance of partnerships goes beyond securing donations from "over 30,000 individual contributors."[28] Records thus gathered from various sites have been conveniently grouped together to form a source of origin – a provenancial context essential to authenticate and reinforce the evidential value of records.

In addition to a meaningful theme and a robust records community, the project team needed to build a memory-storage mechanism and to "provide a public space, a forum, on the web"[29] in order to collect digital evidence. The idea was to design a simple, functional site to facilitate interactivity and to explore the "possibility of using the web not only to present the past but also to collect it."[30] Individuals should be allowed to "easily and quickly deposit their stories" and "the rich array of digital evidence."[31] The website would "collect the broadest possible range of digital materials from an almost infinitely wide spectrum of contributors."[32] To that end, the project team combined database and interface programming with web design technology and ended up with a design that "gave users a sense of simplicity and accessibility and relative speed of navigation."[33] The team also developed "a series of basic procedures and protocols for accepting online submissions of materials to ensure the legal and historical integrity of the materials and to protect the privacy of contributors."[34] The process includes the identification of contributors, the confirmation of entry submissions, the legitimacy and relevancy of entries, and the appropriateness of languages and images. "After an entry was fully processed, it remained in the collections exactly as it had been entered and was displayed on the website according to the contributor's specifications."[35]

Long-term preservation was high on the agenda in the project design. Open source software products were selected to encourage current adoption and to enable future reproduction.[36] Open markup standards (XML) were adopted "to make it possible for future researchers to be able to access what we have collected."[37] Every digital object has been assigned a permanent identifier in the URL, which "allows for stable and precise references, regardless how those objects will be available in the future."[38] The design of keeping everything "as direct and simple as possible," including middleware code, HTML, web design, file formats, navigation hierarchy, and internal documentation and formatting, reflects the consideration of future preservation.[39] The project team also considered a long-term solution to "secure a permanent home,"[40] i.e., "archival custody for our collections."[41] The effort resulted in the accessioning of the Archive by the Library of Congress "as one of its first major digital acquisitions,"[42] a major step leading to the completion of collection formation.

Nature of Records

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[27] Ibid., 403, 408.
[28] Daniel J. Cohen, "History and the Second Decade of the Web," *Rethinking History* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 297.
[29] Brier, "The Intentional Archive," 6.
[30] Cohen, "History and the Second Decade of the Web," 296.
[31] Brier, "The Intentional Archive," 6.
[32] Sparrow, 404.
[33] Brier, "The Intentional Archive," 7.
[34] Ibid., 8.
[35] Sparrow, "On the Web," 407.
[36] Ibid., 411.
[37] Brier, "The Intentional Archive," 8.
[38] Sparrow, "On the Web," 411.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Brier, "The Intentional Archive," 12.
[41] Sparrow, "On the Web," 410.
[42] Ibid.

The tragedy of 9/11 was an experience shared by the entire nation owing to the power of modern media coverage. Each and every one who witnessed the fall of the Twin Towers holds a portion of its remembered history. Due to its diffusive and ephemeral nature, this vital experience, if just remembered rather than documented, would be lost as memory faded in its natural course. A crucial step to preserve this valuable remembered history was to document it, i.e., to turn memory into record.

A variety of memory-recording media, conventional and non-conventional, were adopted in the September 11 Digital Archive project. For example, a special web portal "Tell Your Story," was constructed in collaboration with the NMAH's anniversary exhibit on 9/11 for visitors to tell their stories.[43] Visitor to the NMAH's exhibit on 9/11 were invited to reflect "by recording their thoughts either in writing, with pencils on index cards or, orally, by telling their story in telephone booths where a voicemail system could record their accounts."[44] The voicemail system could also be accessed by dialing a toll-free number to cover a much wider voice-recording community. Voicemail messages then "could be converted on the fly into sound files and sent, as e-mail attachments, to the Archive."[45] Onsite video interviews were conducted and transcribed. Contributors were also invited to upload to the Archive "images and e-mail messages from their digital cameras and inboxes."[46] Spontaneous memorial flyers around the crash sites and all over the city were collected and digitized, and animated "Flash" files were also rescued and saved.[47]

Records thus collected exist in a variety of formats, and more significantly, are accessible from a single interface. There are written narrative accounts, some long and some short, about what people remembered, including where they were, what they saw, and how they reacted. There are e-mail messages sent to or received from family members, friends, and colleagues. There are digital images – photographs taken on the scene, and artwork spontaneously created on the spot. There are interview transcripts that transformed people's memories and feelings into written texts. There are voicemail recordings – people told their stories not only in their own words, but also in their own voices. There are short animation programs, and video recordings. There are digital images of flyers, posters, brochures, announcements, press releases, event programs, daily reports, newsletters, and translated articles.

In a web site review article, Bill Sleeman comments that the true strength of the September 11 Digital Archive is the personal and non-institutional content submitted from individuals that describe their experiences and reactions to the events.[48] The personal side of the events that "predominate among the resources on the site," he claims, "provides historians and researchers important components for telling the whole story of that day."[49] The Archive mainly consists of recollections – what people remembered and reflections and how their lives were affected. In other words, the Archive is not the documentation of what's happened – as recorded, but the documentation of what's happened to people – as remembered.

Records of remembered history thus generated are different fundamentally from records of documented history. This can be shown in the genesis of records of the two types. The science of diplomatics describes traditional record creation as an integrated procedure of initiative, inquiry, consultation, deliberation, and execution.[50] Diplomatics also distinguishes the moment of action from the moment of

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[43] National Museum of American History , "September 11 Bearing Witness to History," http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/september11/tellyourstory/index.asp (accessed May 2, 2008).
[44] Sparrow, "On the Web," 410.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Brier, "The Intentional Archive," 7.
[48] Bill Sleeman, "The September 11 Digital Archive," *Government Information Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (2005): 124.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Luciana Duranti, "Chapter 4: The Procedure of Creation of Documents," in *Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 107–131.

documentation.[51] Born out of the traditional transaction framework, records of remembered history derive from a new procedure of record creation. The procedure, as shown in the case of the 9/11 Digital Archive, comprises experience, recollection, and reflection. People have some personal experiences in the past, they then recall those experiences later, and they contemplate if / how their lives have changed because of those experiences. In this procedure, the moment of action, i.e., when they experience a past event, is always separated from the moment of documentation, i.e., when their memories are translated into records.

The time difference between the moment of action and the moment of documentation is crucial in documenting remembered history. As one of the project team members recalls, "we felt a great concern that something valuable would be lost if we didn't act quickly. Memories would fade, e-mail would be deleted from inboxes, faxes and word-processed diary entries would vanish in the ordinary cycle of hard drive crashes and software upgrades."[52] The project website was first designed to capture those self-documented digital memories of immediate aftermath.

However, the real moment of documentation of 9/11 in the September 11 Digital Archive did not occur until the first anniversary of the tragedy in 2002. It was at this time that a lot of commemorative events took place and personal memory of the 9/11 experience was refreshed and reinforced. Thousands of people participated in those events and shared their (otherwise) undocumented stories. This interesting fact reveals a distinct relationship between the moment of action and the moment of documentation in remembered history. The distance between experience and memory can be shortened by "re-experiencing" the moment of action, thus creating a new moment of documentation when history is turned alive again in people's memory.

The value of the September 11 Digital Archive relies on its successful efforts to create a moment of documentation for ordinary people who were willing to share the moment of experience they had on that fateful day. People witnessed; they expressed not just what they saw, but also how they felt. However, personal witnesses won't last unless they are documented and preserved. Records generated from personal memory and preserved in the Archive are valuable assets as they bear witness to a history that so many people painfully experienced.

Pattern of Representation

The September 11 Digital Archive is a theme-centered, format-oriented, collection-based, and object-specified digital repository. The archival context is provided by a four-level representation system: repository, category, collection, and digital object. The repository-level representation provides background information about the Archive, i.e., the purpose of its existence and the scope of the Archive. It works as a central theme that ties all digital objects together. As was pointed out, a physical archival presence to cover all was difficult to locate because the 9/11 attacks occurred on several sites and the whole nation experienced the events.[53] A virtual presence of collective memory shared by American people thus serves as a central source of origin, without which a lot of intangible and tangible historical evidence would have never taken form or would have disappeared without a trace.

The category-level representation specifies the media or material type of digital objects at the collection level. The Archive consists of thirty collections that fall into seven major categories: stories, emails, documents, still images, moving images, interview transcripts, audio and video materials. This may

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[51] Ibid., 116.
[52] Sparrow, "On the Web," 403.
[53] Richard J. Cox and the University of Pittsburgh Archives Students, "Machines in the Archives: Technology and the Coming Transformation of Archival Reference," *First Monday* 12, no. 11. (November 5, 2007): 8.

remind us of traditional archival series because although they are generally based on record function and filing system, archival series are often associated with physical form of material. Previous studies found that form of material, genre, and physical characteristics are a powerful retrieval tool when they are indexed in archival description and catalog. They can be used, either alone or in combination, to provide access to archival collections.[54] In the September 11 Digital Archive, media and material type are an important representational feature to guide users to browse the collections.

The collection-level representation provides information about individual collections. Each of the thirty collections is represented by a brief title. Some collections have a narrative description. Collections in the September 11 Digital Archive mostly share similar sources of origin. For example, stories submitted directly to the Archive form one bulk collection, consisting of more than 12,000 entries. The Library of Congress, in conjunction with the September 11 Digital Archive, gathered more than 200 user-submitted stories, which are grouped as one collection. Arranging records by source of origin is a principal archival method to preserve the evidential value of records. The September 11 Digital Archive adds value to its collections by preserving their originating sources.

The item-level representation describes individual digital objects. This is the work resulting from the collaboration between the project team and public contributors. The project designer built a metadata schema to guide contributors to upload digital objects and to enter relevant information. A new type of relationship thus emerges that puts emphasis not only on the role of records contributors in archival representation, using the template designed by collection designers, but also on the role of item-level description in gaining archival control over the collections. Associated with each digital object is the item-level description which normally covers title, source, content description, entry date, media type, author, and copyright information. Each object is then linked to its collection-level description and a list of object items in the same collection, thus helping to reveal its originating context.

As a memory-based digital repository, the September 11 Digital Archive was invented rather than inherited. As a result, it lacks a physical central source of origin. The provenance of the September 11 Digital Archive is represented at two levels – repository and collections. The former establishes a purpose for its existence and the latter documents the originating sources of its collections. Collections are then broken down into major categories according to media or material type to facilitate browsing the collections. The purpose of this categorical grouping differs from that of traditional records series. In the archival tradition, the record series plays "the most important and fundamental" role in "putting records in their context."[55] Media and material type are often used as an additional access point to supplement rather than to replace the archival order. The practice in the September 11 Digital Archive seems to shift the archival control from the series level to the collection and item levels. The item-level representation, centrally controlled (metadata template) but individually contributed (data-entry), plays a key role in organizing digital objects into "manageable and describable units,"[56] that is, placing each digital object in the context it belongs.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the archival context of a memory-based digital archive and looks for a new archival discourse that would exert an appropriate archival control over records generated as a result of documentation of remembered history, especially in the digital age. The inquiry places traditional archival

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[54] Helena Zinkham, Patricia D. Cloud, and Hope Mayo, "Providing Access by Form of Material, Genre, and Physical Characteristics: Benefits and Techniques," *American Archivist* 52 (Summer 1989): 300–316.

[55] Fredric Miller, "Archival Description," in *Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*, ed. Laura B. Cohen (The Haworth Press, 1997), 57–58.

[56] Ibid., 57.

theory and practice in a record-making reality different from where it was originated more than a century ago. The new reality necessitates a new archival experience to safeguard the evidential value of records of the remembered past for the sake of future generations. Through a thorough review of the use of a digital archive to capture remembered history, the paper presents the case for a new archival discourse, distinctly expressed in three components:

- The formation of collections involves the archival action of soliciting voluntary contributions to a theme-based collecting repository. Such a collecting effort may involve collection theme development, contributor community construction, submitting mechanism, and long-term preservation strategy.
- The records in the collections derive from the archival action of recording recollections and reflections of personal experience in the past. Personal recollections and reflections can be immediate and spontaneous. They can also be refreshed and reinforced by commemorative activities. Modern recording tools generate multimedia records.
- The representation of collections results from the archival action of organizing and representing collectively-contributed, memory-based records in the light of their originating context. The principle of provenance can be pursued by combining a central theme and multiple collecting sources. The focus of archival order may shift from the series level to the item level, especially, in a digital repository.

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