

Surveillance, Documentation and Privacy: Case Studies in Record Disposition

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Abstract: The annals of modern history are replete with examples of state agency mechanisms to observe and document the subversive activities of internal parties or individuals as well as perceived foreign influences or threats. These files represent the lives of individuals, and archivists face significant ethical challenges regarding their disposition. This comparative study examines cases from across the globe and throughout the twentieth century to reveal the dispositions of surveillance records during or after transfers of power in post-repressive-regime societies. It seeks to identify variables across a variety of situations that affect how archives manage surveillance records and how privacy issues are addressed.

When records of surveillance and repression are made public they take on new meaning. Initially used by the state as a means to control citizens and quell opposition, these records become the evidence used by victims and their relatives for the purposes of accountability, memory-making and truth-seeking. Therefore, records of repression find new purpose in archival repositories. Still, privacy issues persist. How does an archive reconcile the needs of a society to grapple with its oppressive past without perpetuating an individual's on-going invasion of privacy?

This presentation will introduce the research design, the significance of this project and preliminary findings. Implications of this study will inform the present and future deliberations regarding disposition, access and preservation of surveillance files. Ultimately, this presentation will highlight issues of responsibility within the archival context and the role that archives should play in the disposition of these important, yet volatile, records.