Contexts Built and Found:
A Pilot Study on the Process of Archival Meaning-Making

Wendy Duff, Emily Monks-Leeson, Alan Galey & The INKE Team

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years, humanities and archival scholars have theorized the ways in which archives imbue records with meaning. Other disciplines, including museum studies, information studies, and history, have given attention to the ways researchers make relevant connections and meanings from the use of documents. Yet archival theory, though invested in the ways archival users search for and locate records, has not yet studied how users understand the meaning of the records they find. John Scott has suggested that "the ultimate purpose of examining documents [...] is to arrive at an understanding of the meaning and significance of what the document contains" (1990, p. 28). Understanding content, however, is a complicated act, and requires the performative creation of meaning in relation to material records: an active, ongoing process of interpretation and subjective analysis. The making of meaning from records is a process of sifting and sorting through quantities of information to determine that which is most significant—a process based, as John Falk writes, on the "prior knowledge, experience, interests, and values" (2009, p. 137) that researchers bring to bear on their reading of archives.

Building on the premise that the ways users make meaning from records is greatly in need of examination, this paper reports on a pilot study that examined the behaviours of archival meaning-making, especially behaviours of an interpretive rather than forensic nature. Specifically, we are interested in how the process of searching transitions to the interpretation of the records themselves, and to the creation of meaning from material that is open to multiple, shifting, and contingent understandings. We aim to highlight meaning-making as a process rather than a result, focussing on the navigation of collections as a means of tracing that process, in order to assert the importance of interpreting as distinct from seeking. Our context for this study is archival research undertaken by students in a graduate course in the history of the book. As we shall see, book history is a discipline which shares with archives some key questions about interpretation and documents.

Ultimately, our study, as a pilot project, aims to explore the feasibility of researching and understanding meaning-making in archives. As such, our intention is not simply to present our findings, but also to present the theoretical groundings of such an inquiry in order to assert the value of studies on the role and value of meaning-making. It is our hope that this study will also demonstrate the fruitfulness of this kind of collaborative, interdisciplinary research by reflecting on how such an approach can benefit archivists and book historians in particular, and humanities research more generally. With this rationale in mind, we will first discuss the theoretical concepts and scholarly literature that shaped our goals for this paper. We will then describe the process and our interpretations of the research findings, before turning to a discussion of their implications and directions for future work.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK and INTERDISCIPLINARY CONTEXT

Our desire is to highlight not only the interpretive practices of archival research and the reading of documents, but also the contextual, associative nature of such reading. David Beard (2008) has suggested that the interpretive *text* arises from the interactivity of the users associations and contexts, and from documents whose meanings have already been constrained. Beard states that documents, unlike texts, "come to us inflected by the institutions that preserve them. Before the historian has put pen to paper, the document has meaning. The contest between the meaning created within the scholarly work and the meaning imbued by the institution begins" (Beard 2008, p. 255). The first step in understanding the processes by which researchers make meaning from archival records, and thus create a text from their reading of the document, must be to comprehend the archive itself as an active—and potentially competing—agent in the creation of meaning.

In assessing the formation of the text, Beard's essay identifies the tip of a large iceberg. More than one discipline is represented in his essay—archives, of course, but also history, literature, and critical theory—and all are inheritors of the humanities' vast literature on interpretation. Roland Barthes's role in that literature four decades ago was to give voice to a critical school which sought a middle way between the socio-linguistic determinism of structuralism (of which Barthes was a practitioner in his early career) on the one hand, and the liberal man-and-his-work tradition of literary appreciation on the other. The post-structuralism that Barthes pioneered in the late sixties in literary studies, along with Michel Foucault in history, Jacques Derrida in philosophy, and Jacques Lacan in psychoanalysis, challenged the traditional narratives that underwrote interpretive practices across the human sciences. Barthes's 1971 essay "From Work to Text" (Barthes 1977 [1971]), written in the heyday of this period, helped to ensconce *text* as a keyword for generations to come.

For our purposes, the point is that texts may signify in ways that are multiple, unruly, contradictory, and amenable to readings that savour ambiguity over straightforward decoding. That is not to say, however, that texts have limitless meaning. Beard's characterization that "in contrast [to a canonical work], the text is constructed by the reader" (2008, p. 63) does not tell the whole story. While it is true that Barthes's and his school elevate the interpreter's agency in their accounts of interpretive practice, poststructuralist approaches to literature and history tend not to take the form of self-indulgent interpretation run riot, despite the excesses of some who appropriate the label. Poststructuralism and its theoretical antecedents have, if anything, drawn attention to the forces that constrain and authorize interpretation, and indeed shape the subjectivity of the reader. In particular, it is the reader who becomes the focal point of textuality and textual multiplicity. As Barthes asserts in his influential essay "The Death of the Author" (1968), "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing [*sic*] are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 1977 [1968], p. 148). In this sense the reader does not construct the text, strictly speaking; it would be more accurate to say that only in the performance of reading can we perceive the contingency of texts. Meaning is less like a ray of light shining down from the heavens, and more like a constellation of far-flung stars only discernable as a symbolic figure from a specific point in space.

All of this is old news in fields like critical theory and literary studies, in which the influence of poststructuralism has become naturalized to the extent that it often goes unnamed: by metonymy, *poststructuralist theory* has become simply *theory*. Beard's article makes a persuasive case for archivists both to understand the story of poststructuralism anew, and to retell it with a difference. For their part, archivists have begun to draw upon the vocabulary and theories of textual scholarship, especially from the fields of editorial theory and textual criticism, which have close links to the history of books and reading. Heather MacNeil and Bonnie Mak (2007), for example, explore the concept of authenticity from several angles, including the forms of authenticity deployed by literary authors and recognized by their scholarly editors. Linking the editing of literary texts to the conservation of art, MacNeil and Mak (2007) demonstrate that questions about the intentionality of authors and stability of works extend beyond the making and reading of editions to encompass all interpretational practices that involve material traces. As they put it, the dominant themes in current textual criticism include:

> a growing awareness of the ambiguity of authorial intentions and the instability of literary texts; an increasing understanding that the authentic literary text is not shaped by authorial intentions so much as it is constructed by a particular editorial theory of authorial intentions; a movement away from the language of "purity" and "corruption" when speaking about authenticity; and a recognition of the multiple intentionalities in a literary text that endures over time. (MacNeil and Mak 2007, p. 38)

Drawing on the work of G. Thomas Tanselle, Jerome McGann, Joseph Grigely, Hans Walter Gabler, George Bornstein, and others, MacNeil and Mak's summary of changing themes in textual criticism serves as an apt commentary on how meaning is increasingly viewed as something made, not found.

Other archival scholars have also theorized about how contemporary textual theories—and archival functions themselves—affect the meaning users make from records. Tom Nesmith (2005) considers the impact of postmodern and poststructuralist thought on archives and archival theory, and suggests that "records and archiving, as means of communication, are limited by the various influences and factors which shape them, and their limitations then shape what we can know through them" (p. 261). Records, rather than closed texts, are thus "the products of open-ended processes of knowing, and participate in processes of knowing as active agents in them" (Nesmith 2005, p. 261). Similarly, Terry Cook (2001) argues that behind the text there are "many other texts being concealed," and it is the mediation of the archivist, "in setting standards, undertaking appraisal, targeting acquisitions, imposing orders of arrangement, creating logical descriptions, and encouraging certain types of preservation, use, and public programming," that proves critically important to shaping the meaning of records (p. 27). In this way, the act or acts of archiving is understood to "create new frames of reference and meaning […] and in doing so predispose some users of certain modes of understanding rather than others" (MacNeil 2008, p. 22). These processes frame, shape (Kaplan 2002), and "mold collections" (Light and Hyry 2002); create value (Brothman 1991); and construct new narratives (Duff and Harris 2002; Dodge 2002).

Descriptive tools, meanwhile, tell stories about records (Duff and Harris 2002) that support and frame (MacNeil 2005, p. 269) their meanings. Moreover, each use of

archival records, according to Eric Ketelaar (2001), affects "retrospectively all earlier meanings" (p. 38) as researchers contribute new interpretations to the contents of collections. The meanings of archival records are, therefore, not fixed by the acts and interventions that give rise to them; rather, records have multiple meaning that change, and are molded and constructed, by the ongoing actions of archivists, archival institutions, and researchers. As we shall see in the next section, book history is an analogous discipline in terms of its deeply contextual sense of the meanings of documents.

MEANING-MAKING AND THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK

Book historians today tend to be interested not just in the book as a physical artifact, but also in the array of social processes that intersect through that artifact. That has not always been the case in the discipline, but the turn to the social is essential context for our study's focus on exploring the dimensions of meaning-making. What we now call textual scholarship, broadly speaking—comprising bibliography, textual criticism, and scholarly editing—has its origins in the enumeration of books in libraries of the ancient world, especially Alexandria in the fourth century BCE (Greetham 1994, p. 14–15). The enumeration of copies of manuscript books inevitably raised the question of the reliability of specific witnesses, and to this day textual scholarship has been driven by a forensic imperative to determine provenance, authority, and value. In the academic world, this imperative has tended to take the form of scholarly editing projects, especially following the vast textual recovery project known as Renaissance humanism, but a forensic imperative has also driven antiquarian book collecting. (See, for example, Owen Gingerich's account of the world of scientific book collecting, which he navigated for his census of Copernicus's *De revolutionibus*; 2004.)

An exception to the forensic imperative may be found in the textual scholarship of practitioners of the book arts—the printers, typographers, binders, and others who regard the history of books from a designer's perspective. This alternative tradition of textual scholarship takes the form of thinking through making, and runs from the scholar-printers of the first age of print, such as Aldus Manutius, Nicholas Jenson, and Christopher Plantin, to designers who reacted to the modern industrialization of publishing, like William Morris, Stanley Morison, and Eric Gill, to present-day artists, designers, and digital humanists experimenting with new textual forms (Drucker 2009; Galey 2010). Even so, twentieth-century bibliography established the forensic mindset as the dominant one in the Anglo-American academy for many decades.

Only toward the end of the last century did we see approaches to the study of books that synthesized the perspectives mentioned above with the comprehensive influence of social and cultural history, and the interpretive influence of literary and cultural studies (Howsam 2006). It is worth noting that although the journal *Studies in Bibliography* published its first issue in 1948, the journal *Book History* did not appear until 1998, around the same time as new academic programs in book history, including the one from which this study drew its participants. With this shift, book historians began to regard books not only as forensic objects under the spotlight of empirical truth, but also as agents in textual cultures worth understanding holistically. That whole, or system, has been schematized in different ways by Pierre Bourdieu (1993), Robert Darnton (1982), and others. Darnton's map of what he calls the "communications circuit" (1982,

p. 68) has served as book history's touchstone, providing a conceptual framework for projects and a locus of debate for revisors of his model (including Darnton himself; see Adams and Barker 1993, and Darnton 2007). This surprisingly recent social turn in the intellectual framework of the field is key to our study because it reframes the goal of textual scholarship not solely as the recovery of meaning from discrete objects, but also as the production of meaning within a larger system that includes the book historian herself. In Jonathan Rose's words, the central insight of book history, put simply, is that "books make history, and history makes books" (2003, p. 11).

Whatever their orientation, most practitioners of the field in its present form would agree that a book is never just a book; it is always part of something bigger. Book historians are therefore also historians of social phenomena like reading, publishing, intellectual property, design, aesthetics, and economics. Although the disciplinary literature of archives and book history may be different, and may not overlap as much as they should, both fields nonetheless share at least two fundamental preoccupations: one, the relation between objects and processes within complex systems (for example, a novelist's corrected proofs held within a fonds); and the other, a deep methodological commitment to the link between meaning and context. This latter commitment means that book historians sometimes take the radical step of actually reading and interpreting the books they study. For example, D.F. McKenzie's revisionist and influential work established the principle that all aspects of a book's production contribute to its meaning, from paper to typography to binding (McKenzie 1999 [1985]; 2002 [1981]). McKenzie's approach refocused many scholars of literature and cultural history onto the connections between reading and materiality, and indeed prompted many of these scholars to venture into rare book libraries and archives.

Beginning to understand what those scholars do there is the subject of our study. The approach of our study, however, focuses on archives specifically, since in large part the way book historians use rare book libraries is no mystery. Those artifact-oriented research methods tend to be well-documented in the scholarly publications that result, since they often self-consciously address the act of reading a specific book (for example, see William Sherman's *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England*, 2008). Archives are another matter, and to the extent that book historians reflect on their reliance upon archival materials, their reflection tends to take the form of anecdotal accounts of project histories (such as Gingerich 2004), or debates over research methods leading to specific conclusions in partly empirical domains such as publishing economics (see, for example, Thomas Bonnell's critique of William St Clair's archival research in Bonnell 2005–2006, esp. pp. 244–50). Yet archival research is inseparable from the book history enterprise generally, and there are many specific projects in the field which depend far more upon publishers' records than bibliographic analysis of specific copies (see, for example, Janet Friskney's study of the New Canadian Library; 2007).

Even so, book historians in recent years, no less than schlars in other disciplines, have been preoccupied by the forces that shape archives (Manoff 2004). Some scholars have turned accounts of their own research projects into reflections on the opportunities and constraints of archival research in textual scholarship generally (Panofsky and Moir 2005; Groden 2010). Textual scholar David Greetham, in an article titled "'Who's In, Who's Out': The Cultural Poetics of Archival Exclusion" (1999), questions the forces that decide whether and how something is archived, and the constraints those decisions

place upon interpretation:

> we have cultural scraps, garbage, leftovers, selections, bits
> of memory, and [...] we feel uncomfortable about this
> because we probably still retain a desire for a structuralist
> sense of comprehension, of a grid on which all perfected
> works could be plotted. (p. 16)

That desire has led some researchers to swing to the other extreme in their allocation of trust, such that Tanselle has cautioned against the uncritical elevation of so-called archival evidence above other kinds (2002). What is clear is that for book historians, reading archival records is no less fraught with ambiguity than the interpretation of a poem would be for a literary scholar; in both cases, positivism and naive faith in the truth of records has given way to a sense of archives as spaces where meaning is made, not just preserved.

The close connections between archives and book history described above account for the presence of the archival assignment in the book history course that occasioned this study (discussed in the Methodology section below, and reproduced in the Appendix). Students in the Book History and Print Culture program at the University of Toronto are introduced to archival research in their first weeks on the premise that any given book is always part of a larger system. Where archival records exist in connection to a book's publication and reception, that larger system and the details of its influence may be read in the records left behind. These may be publishers' records, authorial drafts, or the private correspondence of authors, editors, translators, and designers. Yet the connections between these records and the events that generated them become clear only by interpreting what they mean. Understanding how those acts of interpretation work is the task of the students undertaking the archival assignment, but it is also a question for the fields of book history and archives as they understand themselves in light of their longstanding close relationship.

ARCHIVAL LITERATURE ON USERS AND INTERPRETATION

Given that this study investigates how students conducting archival research for a class assignment make meaning from records, existing archival literature on user studies and the meaning of archives provides an important contextual element. Within the last twenty years, archivists have increased their understanding of how users search for and locate archival records. Studies including those of Beattie (1989/1990); Duff, Craig, and Cherry (2004); Duff and Johnson (2002); Tibbo (2003); Anderson (2004); and Yakel and Torres (2003, 2007) have looked at the information-seeking behaviours of historians and genealogists, as well as how these users navigate archival retrieval systems. For example, Duff and Johnson's (2002) research indicates that as an historian's background and contextual knowledge expands, his or her ability to identify and locate sources also increases. A few researchers have also examined students' use of archival material. Gilliland Swetland (1998) investigated the needs of students who use digital primary sources, and both Duff and Cherry (2008) and Zhou (2008) studied the impact of archival educational programs on undergraduates.

In the course of framing our study, however, we noted that research specific on

how users understand and make meaning from records is almost non-existent. Yakel and Torres (2003) presented a framework for *archival intelligence*—a term used to explore the knowledge and skills needed by archives users—that highlights the role played by domain knowledge. Archival intelligence also includes 1) knowledge of archival theory, practices, and procedures; 2) strategies for reducing uncertainty and ambiguity; and 3) intellectual skills, which constitute the ability to read a representation. While this model considers the interpretation and analysis of records, it is nonetheless focused on "knowledge about the environment in which the *search* for primary sources is being conducted" (Yakel and Torres 2003, p. 52; emphasis added).

There is a similar lack of research as to how scholars and students actually use the records they locate, how the use of records changes in the digital environment, and how users understand and make meaning from the records they retrieve. As Sundqvist (2007) concluded from her review of archival research, "users have gained some attention since the 1980s" but "use is hardly discussed at all" (p. 647). This is less the case in museum studies and historical scholarship, where studies by Falk (2009), Scott (1990), and Charles Cole (2000), among others, explore the frames of reference that shape how visitors and researchers filter, respond to, and understand their experience of collections. Cole in particular discusses the subjective nature of the information seeking behaviour of PhD students, which he finds "differs from one user to the next even when the information need is 'topically' the same" (2000, p. 444). While the subjectivity he identifies in researcher behaviour may pose a challenge to formulating a singular pattern for meaning-making, what is nonetheless common to all participants is a method of building connections through the material by a process of name collection used both as access points and in pattern formation when reading the records.

Thus, while researchers have focused attention on understanding information behaviour, the use of information itself remains understudied (Vakkari 1997). Kari (2007) conducted a major review of the literature related to information use and concludes that information use can be divided into two separate categories, mental and physical, and that it can be social or personal, can help or hinder a person and involves using sources, internalizing the information and using information. He (2009) identifies three activities involved in information use: 1) communicating; 2) thinking; and 3) acting. He points out that communicating is discursive and social while thinking and acting are personal and involve a demonstration of the knowledge acquired. Similarly, Todd (1999, p. 853) separates use into thinking and acting. Savolainen (2006) highlights the methodological difficulties of studying what is essentially a "black box": though one can observe inputs and outputs, the mechanisms by which an individual makes meaning remains unobservable—at least in the social sciences' sense of observation.

This is not to say, however, that meaning-making cannot be understood. Three quarters of a century ago, Dewey (1933) theorized that to "grasp the meaning of a thing, an event, or a situation is to see it in its relation to other things" (p. 137). Other psychologists have suggested that meaning is mediated by a person's mental model or knowledge structures—the filters of individual experience. Savolainen (2006) notes that meaning-making is not simply a product of rational cognitive activity, but rather is "a personal and situation-bound construct, which combines cognitive and affective elements" (p. 1118). When making meaning, a person "erects a structure, within the framework of which the substance takes shape or assumes meaning" (Kelly 1955, p. 50).

As such, meaning-making "involves incorporating information into an individual's existing knowledge base" (Spink and Cole 2006, p. 25).

Brookes (1980) represents the process of meaning-making in his fundamental equation of information science: expressed as $K[S] + \Delta I = K[S + \Delta S]$. The equation suggests that a person's existing knowledge structure ($K[S]$) is affected by a unit of information (ΔI), and this change results in a changed knowledge structure ($K[S + \Delta S]$). These knowledge structures "appear to be diverse, rich, local, extraordinarily generative" and some are "based on our stored knowledge of versions of the world we have 'encountered'" (Bruner 1986, p. 47). Our models and frameworks thus guide our behavior and our interpretation of text. Bruner explains:

> As our readers read, as they begin to construct a virtual text
> of their own, it is as if they are embarking on a journey
> without maps – and yet, they possess a stock of maps that
> might give hints, and besides, they know a lot about
> journeys and mapmaking. First impressions of the new
> terrain are, of course, based on older journeys already
> taken. In time, the new journey becomes a thing in itself,
> however much of the shape was borrowed from the past.
> (1986, pp. 36–37)

Interpretation is dependent on a person's knowledge or previous knowledge as it occurs within a diverse, rich, and personal structure. The degree to which archival arrangement and description affect the impressions or interpretations made from archival documents remains a cipher.

Overall, while the literature reviewed indicates a general agreement on the interpretive role that archival processes play, few studies have focused on the users' perceptions of this role. Duff and Johnson's (2002) study is one exception, in that it notes how some historians have discussed the subjectivity of finding aids. Their study states that certain of the participants

> understood that the finding aids were created at a specific time and place,
> by an individual with a particular perspective on the material that he or she
> was describing. The historians examined the finding aids not only to see
> how the records were arranged but also to understand the specialized
> language used in the aid and how the aid reflects the biases of the time.
> (Duff and Johnson 2002, p. 481)

Whether other types of users also understand the mediating power of finding aids remains unexamined. This study seeks, in a limited capacity, to begin to address that absence.

METHODOLOGY

The study originated in an assignment given to Masters and PhD students in an introductory graduate course in the University of Toronto's Book History and Print Culture Collaborative Program in the academic year 2009–2010. (The syllabus for the course, Books 1000Y, may be found at http://individual.utoronto.ca/alangaley/.) In the assignment, students were asked to select a manuscript collection from an existing archive or library and document their experience researching the collection in the form of a 10-page diary. We asked that the diaries focus specifically on the process of the students' research rather than on its products. In other words, the diary was to reflect how

the students navigated the collection—how they discovered, selected, worked with, and came to understand the material. (See the Appendix for a description of the assignment as it was presented to the students.)

At the end of the assignment students were invited to contribute their diaries for analysis and to participate in follow-up interviews. Of an already small class of 12, four students submitted their diaries and agreed to be interviewed. Two researchers reviewed the diaries several times and developed questions that sought specific points of clarification on diary entries and probed for more information. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were recorded for later transcription. Our questions were open-ended, with the intention of having each student elaborate on the content of his/her diary and reflect on the ways that he or she formed an understanding of the records.

We did not code the diaries or interviews, opting instead to read through the narratives multiple times for insights on how students made meaning from the archival material they used.

THE PARTICIPANTS

All four participants were enrolled in the Book History and Print Culture program at the University of Toronto. Two students were male and two were female. Two participants had never visited an archives prior to the assignment, another participant had used medieval manuscripts but not archival material, and the fourth participant had consulted archival material for personal interest six times in the previous year. The records the participants decided to use included those of a book collector (Alfred Tennyson De Lury), two poets (Earle Birney and Al Purdy), and a publishing house (Barbarian Press). While not engaged in advanced study of archival theory, the students did have some prior knowledge of archival literature in the course of their Book History seminar, and at least one of the participants had begun graduate studies in archives. Thus, the participants were at least aware that the connections they made among records, events, and individuals arose in part from the groups of the records and they categories presented in the finding aids.

NOTES ON THE FINIDING AIDS

Finding aids for each collection formed an essential part of the context for both the records and our research. All findings aids used in this study can be found online at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library's A-Z Index for Manuscript Finding Aids. (http://fisher.library.utoronto.ca/resources/alphabetical-index-to-manuscript-finding-aids).

The finding aid for the Earle Birney Papers contains thirty-seven pages of description covering 285 containers of archival material. A fond-level note provides a cursory overview of the contents. There are no series; rather, a box list provides an alphabetical arrangement for the records, short box titles (E.G.: Boxes 20-24: Correspondence A-Z"), and, in some cases, a brief description ("Box 65: Malcolm Lowry Periodicals containing selections of Lowry's poetry, edited by Earle Birney"). Similarly, the Alfred Tennyson De Lury Papers have a two-page finding aid for the navigation of a 13-box collection. The first page is given over to a single-line content note and a longer biographical sketch. A one-page container list provides box numbers and a short title and

note (E.G.: Box 11: Newspaper clippings relating to George Bernard Shaw, ca 1916-41. Gift of Professor Harcourt Brown). The finding aid for the Al Purdy papers is even more succinct, offering a one-page box list and one line of description per box.

The findings aids for the Barbarian Press papers and University College Collection of Canadian Authors were, by contrast, far more detailed. The Barbarian Press collection has four separate findings aids, one for each new accession, in which a scope and content note links the accessions to the contents of the larger collection. Each container likewise has its own scope and content note, and the records are arranged according to file titles and given file-level description. This, along with the University College Collection of Canadian Authors finding aid, which ran twenty-three pages for three boxes and gave box-titles and a complete file list, was the most detailed of the finding aids used in the course of the study.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The diaries and interviews gathered information about how the students navigated the archival systems and records, and how they identified and found relevant primary and secondary material. Although the experiences of the students varied, a revealing pattern nonetheless emerged in their archival research processes, which we observed as having three distinct stages. This section will identify and discuss those three stages and provide examples from the diaries, also contextualizing the distinct stages within the larger meaning-making endeavour that was the purpose of the course assignment. It must be stated, however, that the students did not identify these stages themselves, nor were the tasks necessarily completed in a linear manner. The research behaviour was more closely identifiable as "foraging" (Pirolli and Card 1995), and the identification of stages was made by the study's authors.

STAGE ONE

In this stage we observed the participants undertaking the following activities:
- making guesses and following hunches about the existence and content of records
- conceptualizing the material according to a predetermined framework
- building connections of relevancy within the records, according to the participants' identified research topic

The students approached their collections with predetermined notions of the type, extent, and content of the records they would find. One participant writes that the bulk of her course work "is currently in investigating the physical construction of books," and that she viewed the records of "a printing or publishing company, rather than of an author" to be more appropriate for investigating book construction. Her expectation was that such records would contain "enough material to allow for multiple examples of steps in the process." Indeed, all of the diaries provided evidence that the students needed a predetermined framework to select collections and look at records in a meaningful way. While this involved the obvious step of formulating a research question, the students' ability to evaluate and interpret records within a framework was also strongly influenced by their disciplinary backgrounds, or what both Cole (2000) and Yakel and Torres (2003) refer to as their expertise or domain knowledge.

It became apparent in reading the diaries that domain knowledge was foundational to identifying and conceptualizing the meanings of records. It was used to make assumptions about records' contents, to form a predetermined framework through which individual records can be interpreted, and, crucially, to form connections of relevancy between records. While this seemed, with most of our four students, to aid more in the location of records than meaning making itself, we noted that the connections of relevancy students made between records was distinctly coloured by their domain knowledge. In an interview, one student described how her background knowledge affected her interpretation of the archives:

> A lot of my observations about […]the draft sheets were I guess colored by imagination based on what I knew about [name of press]. I knew that it was a very small operation, that the two founding members lived in the same place, that they had their presses, that they worked very, very closely with all of the materials and that they worked together. I also knew that [person's name] did most of the typesetting and from that I could deduce that a lot of the proof marking that had to do with – or a lot of the draft marking that had to do with line length, for instance, was most likely done by that individual. So a lot of the observations that I made were based on prior knowledge.

Another participant, while being interviewed, similarly explained, "My approach to the archives is very much colored by the other types of study that I do. In doing a lot of bibliography style work that I have done, the physical artifact is really the only source." For the student researching censorship, a background in literary studies allowed for the framing of his research into a focused question or thesis on the censorship imposed by Canada Customs and Canadian publishers on a given literary figure. This predetermined framework, built on domain expertise, allowed him to browse the records purposefully, looking for clues as to which documents would best suit his purpose. In doing so, he was able to evaluate the relevancy of the records he located as well as identify the desirability of particular kinds of records he was unable to locate.

STAGE TWO

The students moved on from the first stage to undertake the following activities:

- identifying barriers to records' interpretation
- seeking strategies and alternate means of approaching records; asking questions to create new lines of inquiry, and turning to secondary sources and/or reference aid

The diaries recorded many of the problems students encountered with their methods of approaching the material, especially problems that acted as barriers to understanding. These problems tended to fall into one of two categories, although some students encountered both. One category of problem consisted of not locating what were deemed to be relevant records due to the size of the collections. According to one participant the "variety and exhaustiveness" of the collection he chose proved "problematic in the selection of a clearly delineated subset of material for close study." The greater the archival holdings, the more the participants felt the need to set limits, both on the number

of records reviewed and on the overall scope of their enquiry. This need for limits in turn shaped the relationships the students drew between the records they examined, as well as their comprehension of the relevancy of what they were reading. Decisions of relevancy are particularly important to meaning-making, in that inferences drawn from these records are ultimately interpretive and depend on the meaning that the user makes from the records.

The second category of problem involved the discovery of meanings and formation of interpretations beyond the student's expected research framework. One participant noted that the result of "div[ing] in" to a large sampling of boxes was the discovery of material suited to entirely new avenues of research. This method of "reading around" often produced fruitful results, in that it lead the researchers to new avenues of interpretation. Yet reading around also resulted in one researcher becoming "profoundly frustrated" with what he termed the "portrait of a failure" that was his research experience—the failure, that is, to find what he had initially believed the records to contain. In this example, relevancy is not merely a question of finding useful records, but records that could be properly assimilated to a predetermined framework, or which could modify the researcher's understanding of that framework.

Once problems had been identified, a number of the students reported asking questions in order to create new lines of enquiry. This included identifying what they could not determine because of a lack of records or lack of information, and identifying what they could determine or surmise from the existing records. Literature on the information-seeking behaviour of historians has posited that as background knowledge grows, so does the ability to locate relevant information (Duff and Johnson 2002). For the students of our study, though background or domain knowledge formed the basis of their research goals and initial records' interpretation, they largely remain what Cole (2000) calls "domain novices" rather than "experts." Thus, their knowledge of both their research topic and the records themselves developed simultaneously with their evaluations of the records' meaning, and arguably affected the meaning being made.

Most students reported turning to either reference aids or secondary sources during their research to clarify focus and re-establish meanings sought from the records. Consulting secondary sources had the effect of increasing the students' domain knowledge; this added knowledge framed their use of the archival material and altered the way they understood the meaning of the records. As one participant states:

> I guess in the first part of looking through the [name of collection] I found some things that sort of might be clues as far as further – you know, thematically stuff that I might be looking for, and I mean I guess just with sort of going to secondary sources, just sort of seeing really how other people use the archives, I guess probably framed things a bit as far as how and where I might use things.

Two of the four students also suggested that information gleaned from descriptions of the records influenced their understanding of the records. For one participant, "it was a combination of the printed work itself, as well as a bibliographic entry that referred to how the book came with ephemera, that really contextualized part of the archives that was a real missing puzzle."

Another student described the role of the finding aids as providing "the proper framing of my investigation" by providing a sense "of the kind of subsets that the

material falls into." Using the finding aid in this way helped the student read the archives in a different way:

> R: I also used it [the finding aid] to focus on particular pieces of correspondence that I thought might be relevant or correspondence that was just of interest to me personally.
>
> I: What example could you give?
>
> R: Well, for example, he's got a number of pieces of correspondence with [name of an author], so not entirely relevant to the purpose of my paper, but of relevance for me: I was interested in seeing the kind of relationship there. But I think it also allowed me to look more and to read the archive in a more punctual way. To kind of read it, you know, take a little bit from here, take a little bit from here and kind of have a, this kind of consultation with it and to read it in a little bit of a different way.

This participant also noted how the lack of a detailed finding aid affected the way he looked at the material, suggesting that he had approached the collection "thinking that there might be an itemized list… I think that definitely would have been helpful, [and] it definitely would have changed the way that I had approached the material."

The results of the interventions made by research tools on the interpretation of the records varied and were, as may be expected, largely dependent on the expectations of the student. As Cole (2000) notes, evaluation is subjective and differs "from one user to the next even when the information need is 'topically' the same" (p. 444). Thus, for some, detailed reference tools were crucial to establishing the meaning of the records; for others, such detail was seen as intrusive, guiding them away from what they thought of as their own questions and interpretations. Ultimately, however, the process of identifying barriers, re-framing research questions, and incorporating new elements of domain knowledge based on secondary or reference aid enabled the participants to move towards generating a holistic understanding of the records collections.

STAGE THREE

In the third and final stage we observed, researchers undertook the following activities:

- gaining a holistic understanding of records collections to decipher the value of particular documents or segments
- making connections between records to generate meaning for the collections as a whole

Our study found in all cases that participants reported that their best results came as they moved away from the research aids in order to look "more holistically at the collection," as one researcher put it. He states that his research was "greatly informed" by a broad examination of the records, as by "looking through a significant portion of the material I began to draw connections between the various pieces of ephemera contained therein." The process of reading around the material proved to be valuable to meaning-making as the result was often a building upon those meanings initially expected or sought. As one student identifies: "While I expected a period of less focused observation in order to become acquainted with the materials, I was initially frustrated by my lack of a

consolidated approach to the archive. As the project progressed, however, I discovered that taking time to achieve a familiarity with the archive became valuable."

The researcher's investments in building up a holistic view of the records collections, one which encompassed changes to their framework, to information gained from secondary sources, and to their own increasing familiarity with the collections, enabled all the participants to overcome problems of size and chronology which had obstructed interpretation. As one participant noted, arriving at a holistic view allowed for a new understanding to emerge from the arrangement of the records:

> [the arrangement of the collection] wasn't completely chronological, it was in fact rather late that I actually went back and tried to sort out all the things I had been looking at and cross-reference some of the chronology. But the chronological materials, things like notebooks that actually went though by date … was where I was beginning to see the picture of an identity emerging because then there's a notebook that has records of his book purchases and there you can see him going from a very diffused set, well for one thing you can see him going from his official professional interest, at the beginning it's all mathematical books, an identity that has very little to do with his official professional posts. There are almost no mathematical purchases recorded later on. But you could also see him going from sort of a general interest in poetry and literature to a much more focused concentration on a particular group of authors ….. So in a way you could cross-reference that, you could see where he was meeting people and going to the Abby Theater and getting to know the Irish-Literary scene as you could see his book purchases becoming more and more [name of author]- centered and Irish-centered.

Students who were able to make such connections between the records were thus able to make meaning of the collection as a whole. We interpret this as resulting, at least in part, from an agreement of various factors: an increased or holistic familiarity with the collection, coupled with an increase in domain knowledge, which in turn allows for flexibility and expansion of the research framework. These factors allowed the participants to identify new areas of knowledge and make new meanings from the records. One researcher identified records' arrangement as a significant factor contributing to the meanings she found in her research by helping her to "contextualize some of the features of the [book] production itself." Another participant identified the use of secondary sources as enabling him to re-approach and navigate the collection and thus to move from "aimless digging" to a re-framing of his knowledge of and intentions for the collection. In gaining a sense that "say, this one document [he] had come across was not an isolated thing: that it was part of larger web of, you know, of interest," the researcher reports feeling confident returning to the look at the records themselves, and able to decipher the relationships between the records he was examining.

Ultimately, meaning-making in our study was shown not to be the result of any one particular factor, but an outcome of the weaving together of influences stemming from the archive, the records' content, and the knowledge and intentions of the researcher.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Overall, the diaries and interviews suggest that the participants needed both to come to the material with a predetermined framework, and to go seeking in order to build meaning from the relationships they discovered between records. One researcher referred to this process as the "cobbling together" of various interests and findings that begins with seemingly random and aimless digging, and ends with a perception of the collection as "more manageable" and ultimately more amenable to the "discovery" of particular meanings that it would have been otherwise. Moreover, analysis of the data from the diaries and interviewees demonstrated a number of tasks connected to meaning-making, tasks that include asking questions, making connections, reading secondary sources to increase domain knowledge, and coming to the archives with a particular set of research expectations.

As highlighted in the introduction, this project was intended to be exploratory, a pilot study under limited conditions on the ways in which participants made meaning of the records they found. While this study leans on the results of a class assignment that does introduce a certain bias (in that students were encouraged to think critically about their use of research tools), the diaries and interviews nonetheless point to several factors in the production of meaning in archival research, and offer suggestions as to how archival meaning-making occurs within a context of multiple and interconnected influence.

Arrangement, description, and research tools

The study suggests archival arrangement and description might be a factor in the interpretation of meaning, particularly for participants whose domain knowledge is less extensive, as well as those who come to the archive with specific predetermined research needs. Research tools such as the finding aid contribute to meaning because, in their capacity to foreground certain connections and background others, they are an important part of the framing of records. One researcher reports that despite having a detailed framework upon arriving at the archives, she viewed the "framing" of her research to have begun with a survey of the finding aids associated with her collection. This gave her "a sense of the subsets the material falls into" and which provided the basis for her own interpretation of the records—an interpretation that leaned on predetermined categories set by the finding aid.

The arrangement of the records was repeatedly cited as contributing to or preventing the formation of meaning. The ways in which this occurred, however, were far from uniform. We noted that while one researcher found the brief content description contained in the finding aid to be of "particular value" in providing her with specific information, she nonetheless was later required to abandon a specific search and engage in foraging activity in order to understand material in relation to her research needs. Another researcher found the cross-referencing between collections and materials in her finding aid to be "both welcome and depressing" as she recognized that, in foregrounding certain connections, "so many intersections of different collections must go unmarked and undiscovered." Indeed, while one researcher looked for records arranged in chronological order, and found the research became more difficult in the absence of this, others preferred to go outside of the archival reference tools and use secondary sources to re-align their comprehension of the records they had viewed. These findings suggest

ways in which the archival functions of arrangement and description, e.g., foregrounding relationships, providing a holistic representation of the material, may change the meaning users make from records. What the findings do not show, however, is any regularity in the expectations students bring to their use of reference tools, or the specific effect such tools have on the production of meaning. Those would be questions for a larger and more detailed study.

Background and domain knowledge

As noted by Cole (2000), patterns of information-seeking behaviour are primarily subjective, even among those whose information needs are closely similar. Our study indicated that differences in the background knowledge of participants had a significant effect on the ways they made connections among records, and on the types of meaning they generated. For one researcher, background knowledge and research framework amounted to the assumption of a "role." She writes that although her findings were "disappointing for a literary scholar in search of new texts," for a biographer they provided new understanding of the creator as a collector. Thus, while the researcher claimed elsewhere to avoid expectations and assumptions about the material, she nevertheless seems to recognize that frameworks for meaning are multiple, mutable, and may affect the reading of the records by establishing a variety of potential meanings. In effect, meaning-making required the adoption of a selective viewpoint that cannot, as Scott (1989) argues, "escape the concepts and assumptions of [a researcher's] own frame of meaning" (p. 31). However, the responses of our study participants lead us to question the implications of Scott's "escape" metaphor, which conjures an ideal scenario in which researchers would liberate themselves from their own subjectivity if they only could. One conclusion that becomes apparent in our participants' comments is that the participants themselves do not regard subjectivity as a limitation to be overcome; for them, subjectivity is a condition of knowledge in archival research.

While the importance of a predetermined framework and background knowledge has been discussed in the findings section of this paper, it is important to highlight that a researcher's framework and domain knowledge not only created certain expectations for the records, but also enabled the perception of connections which other researchers wouldn't necessarily see. Susan Crean (2011), in "National Archives Blues," writes that archives, "be they institutional or the papers of individuals […] are never complete or comprehensive. What floats up from the past is largely a matter of serendipity, which means that archival research is pretty much a crapshoot" (p. 20). One researcher echoed this language suggesting that her own location of relevant material, which "the finding aid had given me no cause to expect," was itself a kind of "selective serendipity."

What this study reveals is that, far from a "crapshoot" where meaning emerges by chance and coincidence, archival *finding* depends very much on archival *looking*. The serendipity is indeed selective: meaning is generated in accordance with what is being sought, what is expected, and what is already known by the researcher. Crean's "crapshoot" metaphor may be more apt for archival research than she realized, since the game of craps includes non-random elements, too; like all games of chance, it may be played with skill and awareness of the context of one's actions (such as quitting while one is ahead). Gambling and archival research alike thrive upon the interplay of deliberate strategy and blind chance.

Context, meaning, and circuits of influence

To return to this paper's earlier comments on Barthes and the text, the preliminary results of this study affirm the plural, unruly, and at times contradictory readings that result from readings of archival records. These readings are not, of course, unlimited, but still multiple and contextual. For Barthes, it is the reader who functions as the focal point of textuality, the destination that gives unity to the text via the generation, or selection, of textual meaning. Archival meaning-making, it would seem, similarly occurs within a confluence of influence that centres, in a given point and time, on the researcher. Whereas Darnton and other book historians place textual production and reception within a communications circuit or system which highlights links between meaning and context, so too can archival meaning-making be placed within a network of interactive influence. To borrow from book history and Darnton's model, the tasks identified in the research findings may be reconceptualised from occurring in stages to forming a circuit of behaviours, each of which feed into knowledge formation and making of meaning from archival records. With respect to the archival text, meaning is not simply the product of domain knowledge, or archival interventions on the records, or research tools; meaning is made through the interplay between these factors. While the entry point to this circuit often takes the form of a predetermined research framework and specific expectations about the records, the meaning that is made depends on the extent and type of the framework. What records mean also depends upon the degree to which records coincide with or vary from expectations, as well as the connections built, barriers experienced, and methods addressed for overcoming these barriers. As we have seen, those methods include new lines of inquiry developed, and secondary sources or research tools sought and provided.

Meaning-making is thus highly contextual, occurring within the grey area of subjectivity wherein the paths by which specific meaning is made can be charted, and yet remain unpredictable. While impossible to isolate one predominant factor in the generation of meaning, our study points to the networks of influence that surround archival meaning-making—a network or circuit that presents new venues for research on the ways knowledge-formation occurs. From this circuit a particular understanding of the records emerges. We can suggest, therefore, that meaning-making is thus, on the one hand, a fundamentally individual process in that no set of factors can ever be entirely replicated from one researcher to the next. On the other hand, meaning-making is nevertheless also a social process, as a great number of factors that influence meaning exist beyond the researcher herself: the sources and nature of background knowledge; the research tools, such as secondary sources and reference aids; the arrangement and description of the records; and of course the records themselves, which spring from a wide influence and provenance. All of these factors constitute the multiple and often unpredictable outcomes of the meaning-making process.

Conclusions

As discussed in the theoretical framework, archivists of the past twenty years have been exploring the ways that archival tools—finding aids, guides, websites, and so forth—influence the meanings of the records. The act of archiving, as stating, has come to be seen as generating new frames of reference, and in doing so to favour certain

meanings over others (MacNeil 2008). While the present study supports this claim, it also suggests that the influence of reference tools is far from the only factor determining meaning. Indeed, the study may well suggest that the anxiety felt by archivists in the generation and exclusion of certain meanings via their archival practices is not entirely justified, given that the influence of these change within the broader context of competing influences that affect meaning.

Thus, as archival theorists we may well shift our concern from the essences of artifacts to their continuous states of becoming within systems. While we may state with Crean (2011) that researchers "are prospectors: ever hopeful, ever on the lookout for clues, ever willing to take detours," it is less plausible that the only suitable approach to archival research "is the innocent one: open and undemanding" (p. 20). Our study suggests that, even when assigned a prospecting expedition, researchers do indeed bring a network of demands, influences, and expectations to the material. It is these factors, or rather, their occurrence within a circuit of influence, that enables connections, and meanings, to be both found and made.

The concept of archival meaning-making is deeply complex, determined by networks of influence too extensive to exhaust in a single study. While poststructural textual scholarship focuses on the reader as a locus of meaning within a complex system, archives literature rarely if ever points to the user in a similar way, but focuses instead on the competing meanings of records and the influence of archivists and records-keeping systems. We have sought to demonstrate that these influences, however, along with reference tools and domain knowledge, serve rather as entry points into the larger circuit of archival meaning-making. Ultimately, we hope this paper will encourage further avenues of research that make use of a methodological focus on processes, or on *interpreting* rather than *finding*.

Acknowledgments

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APPENDIX

Assignment 2: archives report

6-8 pages, excluding Works Cited and notes

This assignment requires you to visit a rare book library or archives and become familiar with the contents of a collection of authors' papers or publishers' records. You will then submit a short report in the form of a research diary on the contents of these collections and their potential interest to book history researchers.

The purpose of this assignment is to introduce students to archival research as an important stage within the larger research process. While your goal is to locate potentially significant or interesting material amidst the larger collections and to then consider its potential as research material, you should bear in mind that the focus is on the *processes* of research as distinct from the *products*.

You should begin by using finding aids, including online catalogues, to identify a collection of records that interests you. Your criterion for selection should be the material's potential interest for book history research—imagine this assignment as the first stage in a larger research process, potentially leading to a longer study. The scholarly literature that's been written about a given collection (if there is any) can help suggest leads, but make sure you cite these sources if you use any. For the purposes of the assignment, you'll likely need to select a subset of the materials. It's up to you how to define that subset—temporally, thematically, by publication, etc.—but your report should begin with a clear description of the scope of your material, and provide some rationale for its relevance to book history research. Although we have been focusing mostly on authorship and authors' papers in the course so far, publishers' records would be equally suitable for this assignment.

The report should not be an exhaustive catalogue of the whole of a given collection. Rather, it should take the form of chronological diary entries describing the *process* by which you selected, discovered, and worked with the materials. Questions your diary entries should answer include (but are not limited to):

- How did you decide what to look at?
- Did you encounter any gaps in the materials or problems with the finding aids?
- What other sources of information did you turn to in order to solve these problems? (Record any and all steps you took.)
- In addition to the official finding aids, did you end up using any informal or unexpected methods for locating material? How did parts of the archival materials lead to other parts?
- How did your understanding of the records you were working with change from the start to the end of your research?

Toronto is a city of archives. In addition to the archives at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book

Library, here are some of the others (and feel free to post other to the discussion board):

City of Toronto Archives: http://www.toronto.ca/archives/
Province of Ontario Archives: http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/
Canadian Lesbian & Gay Archives in Toronto: http://clga.ca/index.shtml
Toronto Public Library special collections: http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/books-video-music/specialized-collections/
Royal Ontario Museum Library and Archives: http://www.rom.on.ca/collections/library.