

## REVIEWS

## Reviews as Critical Engagement

Bethany Anderson

ReviewsEditor@archivists.org

In the July/October 1972 issue of *American Archivist*, Richard H. Lytle reviewed *The Assault on Privacy: Computers, Data Banks, and Dossiers* by legal scholar Arthur R. Miller. Lytle's review discusses the great and unprecedented threat that computers and technology pose to personal privacy, given the ability of these "new electronic devices" to more rapidly and widely distribute information. "The computer's threat to privacy," Lytle writes, "derives from its capacity to accept, manipulate, and transmit information" (p. 403). The concerns Lytle raises resonate especially today as we face the mass commodification and weaponization of personal data and information. But, while his review of *The Assault on Privacy* brings to the fore a number of ethical and pragmatic issues from an archival perspective, Lytle rightly notes that the book was not written for an archival audience. Lytle finds the book ultimately "disappointing" for its lack of solutions and failure to incorporate an archival perspective into this discussion: "How can a book be written about problems of information use in our society without discussing information management and information managers?" (p. 405).

Reviews are a space in which to critically engage with scholarship from the archival community and allied professions, as well as publications authored by "nonarchivists" that have implications for archives and archivists. In fact, reviews are fundamentally an exercise in critical engagement—they critique, question, and engage with new scholarship, whether or not it is written or created for archivists and allied professionals. I always encourage reviewers to fairly critique publications, not to merely focus on identifying a work's flaws, so that they can analyze it within a reflexive and critical framework—engage with a work in an analytical fashion. Indeed, like Lytle's review, reviews do not suffice as mere criticism of works alone. It is important for readers to understand why *The Assault on Privacy*'s omission of an archival perspective, especially when that perspective would be particularly germane to the issues about which Miller writes, has serious implications for how digital privacy is discussed and analyzed. Archivists and legal scholars alike collectively lose out when archivists are omitted from that conversation. A review must critically engage with works if we are to have these conversations and a seat at the table.

The reviews in this issue of *American Archivist* serve as examples of critical engagement and assess publications not exclusively written from archival perspectives. Clayton Lewis reviews *Photography and Other Media in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale. Lewis considers one of the book's arguments—that the history of photography should be understood through the lens of media history—and what that argument means for repositories as they preserve and create access to photograph collections. In the review of *The Eugenic Rubicon: California's Sterilization Stories*, Maija Anderson assesses Jacqueline Wernimont and Alexandra Minna Stern's digital medical humanities project published on the Scalar platform. The publication serves as a way to interrogate the history of eugenics while striking a balance between centering the perspectives of patients with protecting their privacy and medical records, and the platform's structure and layered multimedia ambience present new and yet familiar ways of navigating such content.

Another review also analyzes a history of science publication: Trevor Owens critiques *Science in the Archives: Pasts, Presents, Futures*, edited by Lorraine Daston. While *Science in the Archives* does not include any essays by archivists, Owens describes the valuable perspectives this book offers about how scientists seek to create a “usable past” with their records. In addition, two other reviews discuss publications written primarily from historical perspectives. In his assessment of *Archives and Information in the Early Modern World*, edited by Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters, and Alexandra Walsham, Eric C. Stoykovich considers a work that sheds light on the early history of the archival profession. And Jeffrey Mifflin reviews *Albrecht Dürer: Documentary Biography*, edited by Jeffrey Ashcroft, which presents an alternative mode of “access” for archival materials as explored through documentary annotation and aggregation. As these reviews illustrate, the ways these histories are assembled and reassembled are closely tied to the ways in which archival materials are arranged and contextualized; but, having the perspective of an archivist enables us to be more acutely aware of the issues these constructions raise.

As new frameworks for preserving and creating access to archival materials emerge, so too do new understandings and approaches to archival theory. In her review of *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, by Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale, Anna Trammell explores the ways the Critlib movement has advanced discussions about critical theory to address the social and political challenges that confront the library and archival professions. Turning to other challenges that affect archival theory and practice, Juan Ilerbaig disentangles Geoffrey Yeo's discussion of the contemporary information-driven conceptual shift in *Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record-Keeping in an Information Culture*. While Yeo, on the one hand, argues that “records” and “archives” should be seen as distinct conceptual entities from

“information,” Frank Upward et al. argue for convergence, on the other hand, in *Recordkeeping Informatics for a Networked Age*. As Sarah Demb notes in this review, the authors’ advocacy of an encompassing recordkeeping informatics profession raises a number of interesting questions for further discussion. What is clear from these publications, however, is that we must uphold archival tenets as new frameworks emerge for thinking about the constellation of information products.

Emerging scholarship also seeks to address the daily challenges of archival practice. To take one example, the complexity of email preservation requires holistic treatment as well as sustained advocacy. Kelsey O’Connell’s review of *The Future of Email Archives: A Report from the Task Force on Technical Approaches for Email Archives* explores the immediacy of this report and its practical strategies for preserving email. In the review of *The No-Nonsense Guide to Born-Digital Content* by Heather Ryan and Walker Sampson, Blake Graham evaluates the practicality of a guide written for all areas of expertise. Last, Ryan Speer engages with *Ethics for Records and Information Management*, by Norman A. Mooradian. Though a textbook in structure, Speer sees the work as a site for debate as records managers negotiate the ways ethical frameworks can be incorporated into records management practices.

Reviews employ several different types of writing; they are partly descriptive and give readers a sense of the publication’s structure and content; they are also partly analytical and reflexive. This critical engagement is crucial for us to ask new questions, but also for us to take a seat at the table where our voices are needed.