

Archives in the Digital Age: Preservation and the Right to Be Forgotten

By Abderrazak Mkadmi. London, UK, and Hoboken, NJ: ISTE, Ltd; Wiley, 2021.
240 pp. Hardcover €154.95, eBook €139.99. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-786-30676-0;
eBook ISBN 978-1-119-82501-2.

Abderrazak Mkadmi, research professor at the Higher Institute of Documentation at Manouba University in Tunisia, explores issues of privacy and access in the context of digital archives and preservation in the eighth volume of the Digital Tools and Uses set of the Computer Engineering Series published by Wiley and ISTE. Mkadmi's stated purpose in *Archives in the Digital Age: Preservation and the Right to Be Forgotten* is to focus on the conflict between the drive to preserve digital data and make it accessible as widely as possible, which Mkadmi calls the "right to remember," and the privacy of individuals and their "right to be forgotten" (p. xiii). The explosion of data production and collection in the past decade has ensured that more information about individuals and organizations is available than ever before. The preservation or archiving of this data presents opportunities to researchers now and in the future, but it may also haunt individuals who "are condemned to live without privacy . . . in the face of the mistakes of their past" (p. xiii). Mkadmi is concerned with whether these two competing values might be reconciled.

Mkadmi takes a methodical approach to his subject, beginning with defining the foundation of digital archives and the tools and standards used to archive digital documents. His background as a French-speaking scholar working in Tunisia shapes his conception of archives, both analog and digital. This concept is grounded in French archivist Yves Perotin's theory of Three Ages, in which the first two "ages" emphasize archival documents as "evidential" in a legal or administrative sense, while the third age focuses on the "conservation and communication of permanent archives" (pp. xii, 3). The long-term conservation of documents, particularly in a digital format, heightens the challenge of balancing accessibility and privacy. Mkadmi explores this tension, probing issues stemming from the rise of digital humanities, the expansion and collection of Big Data, and the technical and legal challenges of ensuring individual privacy.

The book is structured in five main chapters that build on each other. The first chapter serves as a high-level overview of digital archives, including discussion of what constitutes an archives at its most basic level. The chapter also serves as a handy reference for foundational concepts in the field, including archives management, digital archives, records management, electronic records management, and more. Mkadmi also describes a host of tools and standards for managing a digital

archives. For example, he discusses different types of scanners and technologies for digitization as well as provides considerable detail on the records management standard, ISO 5489.

The second chapter dives specifically into the standards and technologies used to manage digital archives, including ISO 14721 (Open Archival Information System or OAIS), ISO 19905 (PDF/A), and ISO 15489 (records management). Mkadmi also discusses standards specific to the practice of archival management in France and Francophone countries (e.g., NF 461 for electronic archiving systems). Chapter two also explores metadata standards, management of audiovisual material, and email archiving. The chapter serves as a solid reference for managing digital archives, but it does travel down a more detailed path than is strictly necessary for a discussion of the right to be forgotten.

Mkadmi then pivots in chapter three to consider the emergence of the digital humanities as a field and its impact on archives, particularly the impetus for making more digital data available to more researchers. The chapter provides a useful overview of the history of digital humanities from the literary and linguistic computing of the mid-twentieth century to the emergence of the term *digital humanities* after 1994. He also highlights the disparity in the varying definitions of digital humanities and asserts his belief that the term ultimately defines “a set of good practices in a world where digital technology reigns supreme” (p. 78). The supremacy of digital technology and its use in the humanities are, as Mkadmi argues, impacting the practices of archives and archivists. In addition to being “repositories of knowledge,” archives must also become “repositories of data” needed to access digital humanities products (p. 80). The software platforms considered in this chapter are specific to French (or Francophone) institutions (e.g., the OAIS-compliant digital humanities access platform, ISIDORE), but the discussion of specific elements and standards, such as PREMIS metadata, EAD/EAC, and OAIS, is useful across all contexts. The chapter’s main purpose, however, is to highlight the impact of digital humanities on archival practice. Mkadmi argues that the overall effect of digital humanities practices and products is to increase “openness, expansion and infinity of resources” (p. 107).

Contributing to this deluge of digital assets is the expansion—or, more accurately, the explosion—of Big Data. This is the theme of Mkadmi’s fourth chapter. Big Data in this context refers to data generated by computers, smart phones, tablets, internet connection devices of all kinds, and cryptocurrencies, among other technologies. Mkadmi does a good job of laying out the difficulty of a one-size-fits-all definition of Big Data, but he does not question how much of the data actually is worth preserving for the long haul; he seems to assume that all of it will be archived. For example, he explores technologies, such as blockchain, for ensuring “the ability to record and perpetuate everything,” but he does not provide an analysis of what ought to be selected for long-term preservation from all of this

data (p. 148). He does supply a useful discussion of the technical challenges and issues that Big Data preservation raises, but he focuses more on descriptions of the technologies and their potential applications than the obstacles, issues, and ethical considerations of these technologies and the data they create. He is particularly convinced of the applicability of blockchain technology to the preservation of this glut of data, devoting almost a third of the chapter to this topic.

The fifth chapter finally turns to the issue of the “right to be forgotten,” which the book’s title suggests is the crux of Mkadmi’s argument. The chapter opens with a discussion of what this right is, concluding that it is “being able to remove from the Web certain information relating to past actions that are unwanted and/or that could harm or injure an individual” (p. 150). Mkadmi points out that this can take two forms: deletion or dereferencing. However, he spends relatively little space discussing this concept before turning to the limits of the right, especially in the context of open access to information that the Web and other digital technologies are predicated upon. The chapter includes a thorough discussion of the very real obstacles to addressing this right as well as outlines the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).¹

Archives in the Digital Age ultimately works best as a reference manual, especially within the ecosystem of digital preservation as practiced in continental Europe and France, in particular. Given its inclusion in Wiley’s Computer Engineering Series, it is not surprising that the book focuses more on technical standards, specifications, and tools than on ethical considerations. Those looking for an in-depth discussion of the ethical dilemma of providing access and enhancing individual privacy may be disappointed and would be well advised to pair this book with works focused on the impact of the right to be forgotten on the practice of archives in the United States. An example of this work is Ashley Nicole Vavra’s article, “The Right to Be Forgotten: An Archival Perspective,” in which she explores the ways in which right to be forgotten regulations conflict with traditional archival values and practices.² Those looking primarily for an exploration of technical considerations and tools will be well served by Mkadmi’s book.

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¹ For more information, see General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), “General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – Official Legal Text,” accessed February 24, 2023, <https://gdpr-info.eu>.

² Ashley Nicole Vavra, “The Right to Be Forgotten: An Archival Perspective,” *American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (2018): 100–111, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.1.100>. See especially the final section, “From the Archival Perspective.”