Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories is recommended reading for archivists seeking diverse, global viewpoints in archival science and recordkeeping practices. It is a carefully curated compilation of works authored by individuals from a variety of archival settings.

The focus of each of the 11 chapters is, generally, non-North American and mostly European; authors working in countries such as Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and the UK are highlighted. There is a chapter devoted to recordkeeping developments in the sub-Saharan, African nation of Malawi and a chapter on archival ethics that contains a case study involving native, tribal peoples of Canada, also.

Unique Retrospectives

The five chapters in Part 1 are classified as “Rethinking Histories and Theories.” This is an apt descriptor for these macro, theory-based works. In contrast, Part 2, “Engaging Records and Archives,” represents findings at a grassroots level and provides six chapters of unique retrospectives and lessons learned.

The book’s editors are, themselves, recognized leaders and respected educators in the archival community. The “Editors’ Introduction” section offers insights into the publication’s genesis, stating that the book was compiled from papers presented in 2015 at the Seventh International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA 7).

The 2015 conference was sited in Amsterdam, but it has been held in various locations over the years, including the United States. While a limited number of participants may be able to attend these biennial conferences, the availability of this book allows readers around the world to gain access to others’ scholarly efforts and in-the-field experiences.

The Danger of Digital

The chapter “Mapping Archival Silence: Technology and the Historical Record” may be of particular interest to information governance practitioners and records managers. The discussion of digital technologies and their effect on information management is thought-provoking.

The author posits that where there is digitization, the specter of “archival silence” looms. According to the author, archival silence is described as either “gaps or omissions in a body of original records” or “materials that are not available in formats useful for scholarly research.” The ever-expanding trove of digitized records, whether harkening from government, corporate, or cultural heritage groups, points to the importance of recognizing this consequence of digital technology’s advancement. The time, personnel, and costs required for digitization projects, particularly those conducted on a grand scale with large amounts of records, can be massive. This dilemma will, undoubtedly, continue to plague the archives/record management community for decades to come and will affect future generations of educators, users, and researchers.

Gaps in Coverage

A shortcoming of this volume, if it could be deemed as such, is the predominance of chapters focusing on paper-based recordkeeping initiatives. Given that this book is a compilation of selected research from I-CHORA 7, this may have been unavoidable due to the nature of the body of work presented at that conference.

That caveat aside, the Part 1 section includes a nod to 1980s database technologies with its chapter on data modeling. Ideally, Part 1 could have benefited from inclusion of a chapter devoted to an examination of social media’s projected impact on recordkeeping theory and culture; while the “history” of social media is short, it could be argued that social media-related technologies are ingrained in society and have necessitated “rethinking” of many facets of records management.
An Attempt to Effect Change in Local Government Records
Richard J. Cox, Ph.D.

Back in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, a resurgence of interest in local government records resulted in many new archives and records management programs and publications on the subject. Basic volumes appeared: Local Government Records: An Introduction to Their Management, Preservation, and Use by H.G. Jones in 1980 and The Management of Local Government Records: A Guide for Local Officials by Bruce Dearstyne in 1988. Then interest seemed to wane, although a lot of good work continued going on, quietly reported at conferences and other meetings.

Notably, the final chapter, “Reflecting on Practice: Artists’ Experiences in the Archives,” is intriguing in its unique vantage point and artistic sensibility. It reminds readers of the need to embrace the broad continuum of experience, appreciating affect and effect alike. The author suggests, “Artists can remind and encourage archivists to think differently.”

A Worthy Addition
Written from a distinctly academic (and archival) perspective, the book’s chapters are products of extensive research and contain bibliographic references, as well as notes. The concluding section of the publication is a comprehensive index.

This title would be appropriate as a supplementary text for a graduate-level archives/records management course. It would also be a worthy addition to the bookshelf of any well-read information practitioner – whether archivist, records manager, or information governance professional.

An Artistic Sensibility
Certainly, discourse related to the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, inclusivity, and diversity abounds in the archival literature, spanning both rigorous academic reporting and press communications in various print and electronic media. This book does succeed in covering a wide swath of multicultural interests and divergent approaches.

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