

The Ontology of the Archive Conference

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Constructing and Deconstructing a Digital Data Archive

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Abstract

If ontology is the study of what exists, then an ontology of the archive asks us to consider what kind of a thing is an archive. There is a remarkably energetic debate about such questions, anchored at one end by traditional definitions of an archive as a repository holding valuable or rare documents to Derrida at the other end remarking that "nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive'". In particular, what kind of a thing is a data archive and is it different from other archives? This paper will explore various features that may differentiate data archives by using the examples of ESDS Qualidata and the new Timescapes archive of qualitative longitudinal data based at Leeds. There are distinctions in many areas, however, regarding formats, technical methods of "archivisation", and most importantly, the political dimensions of inclusion and exclusion, traditional and data archives are more alike than not. I consider the political dimensions of ingest such as mandated deposit and the roles of informed consent and researcher intentionality. Despite the considerable challenges and risks, I remain optimistic about the positive potential of digital data archives to enable conversations across time.

Keywords: data archive, digital, consent, context, intentionality