

The Silence of the Archive. By David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson. London: Facet Publishing, 2017. 187 pp. Index. Softcover. \$80.00.

In *The Silence of the Archive*, David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson explore the limitations of the archive by examining its silences, gaps, and deliberate omissions. While unraveling the many causes for these silences, the authors also present strategies for avoiding future silences in the archival record. By highlighting the missing voices in the record, the authors remind us of the power of recordkeepers to distort history. The goal of this book is to make archivists and recordkeepers aware of this distortion and, perhaps, create a more robust record going forward by challenging the traditional methodology of archives.

The first chapter, “Enforced Silences,” by Simon Fowler, examines some of the various reasons for silences in the archive. While many of the reasons for these silences are obvious, such as who wields the power in society and who has access to traditional power structures of recordkeeping, other reasons are not as obvious, particularly in cultures with oral traditions as opposed to written histories. The traditional tendency toward the written word in archives hides entire cultures that document their histories differently. Informality can also create silences. Fowler discusses how most citizens’ daily lives will never be documented in conventional records. Records kept by governments do not seek to capture the everyday experiences of its citizens, but rather are limited to documenting events that aid in basic governance such as deaths, marriages, and births. Governments’ tendencies toward secrecy and destruction also create silences. Fowler argues that routine destruction of records by bureaucrats is usually shortsighted and fails to take into consideration the historical value of those records. This destruction of records can be a matter of routine or an attempt by a government to hide the failings and hard truths of its decisions. Frequently, governments obscure archival records by deciding that they are secret or vital to security. While this may be true in many regards, the tendency toward secrecy in governments also hides the truth of highly impactful events from the record.

Chapter 2, “Inappropriate Expectations,” also by Fowler, examines how users might have unrealistic expectations about the content found in archives. No archive is complete, and archivists need to convey to users that many of the documents they seek may never have existed or been retained. Fowler notes that many of the records in archives are the product of bureaucracy, and the tendency to rely on bureaucracies creates gaps and silences. Fowler provides as an example the shift to civil law in England, which moved the care of the sick and impoverished from the church to the state, thereby changing what records were created and subsequently retained. Another inappropriate expectation Fowler outlines is dependence on the catalog. Fowler admits a catalog is necessary to inform users about what records exist, but he also contends that the manner in which a catalog is created can obscure the records held and create a silence by hindering discovery and use. Terminology and lack of expertise have long plagued archival catalogs. When records are described using archival jargon or unnatural language, discovery and use become difficult. Fowler acknowledges the prodigious amount of work it would take to fix these catalogs, but advocates that archivists reach out to those with

more expertise in the materials to help clearly articulate what users can expect from the records held in the archive.

In chapter 3, “The Digital,” David Thomas examines the explosion of digital records and the potential for silences created by the increased volume. Thomas contends that not only is digital preservation an issue, but also authenticity, access, and description. The ease of creating digital records and digital archives presents problems for traditional archives. If anyone can create a digital archives, then why are traditional archives needed? Thomas contends authenticity and continuity will need to become the purpose of traditional archives in the digital age. Ensuring that digital records are unaltered and continuously available will be paramount if digital archives are ever to carry any historical weight. Another pressing issue for digital records will be the silence created by sheer volume. Traditionally, archives provided historians and users a chance to closely read the records to discover meaning and historical events. Close reading of digital records is significantly harder. If a petabyte of data is created, how can one ever grasp what is contained in that vast trove? Here Thomas argues that interface design and search tools will play a powerful role in accessibility and discoverability. Poor interface design can make interaction with digital records difficult to impossible, so too can a lack of robust search and visualization tools. Archives will need to drastically alter their procedures and functions to capture, maintain, describe, and make accessible the vast world of digital records.

Chapters 4 and 5 address the implications of the silences that exist in archives. In chapter 4, “Dealing with the Silence,” Valerie Johnson considers how to handle these silences. Johnson contends that silences must first be acknowledged. Historians and users of archives must accept and explain that the archive does not contain the whole truth of any society because certain voices have been discarded. This acknowledgment allows future archivists to seek out ignored voices and nontraditional records. Johnson also advocates for looking to nonconventional records to fill the gaps, such as histories and other folk traditions that are transmitted orally. While Johnson presents some ways to address the silences ethically, in chapter 5, “Imagining Archives,” David Thomas explains how forgeries and fictions have taken advantage of these silences. For example, Thomas details how a lack of records opened a space for people to create fictions about the Middle Passage of the slave trade or even to create forgeries to fill in the historical details of Shakespeare’s life. When researchers cannot find the documents they desire, a possibility exists for the creation of fictions to smooth out narratives or even for the exploitation of the lack of detail for financial gain. While most users of archives would not undertake such falsifying, it must be taken into consideration, and miraculous narratives or “findings” must be vigorously questioned.

In chapter 6, “Solutions to the Silence,” Valerie Johnson outlines possible remedies for archival silences. Johnson challenges archivists to think critically about appraisal, access, and cataloging to prevent future silences. Archivists need to ensure that they are not only documenting the powerful and extraordinary, but also the marginalized and the mundane. Johnson offers that expanding the definition of “record creators” to include everyone who has contributed to a record’s creation or anyone affected by that record

could increase the amount of information captured by including more voices in the archival record.

Chapter 7, “Are Things Getting Better or Worse?” by David Thomas, ponders the current and future state of archives. Are the silences in archives getting better or worse? Thomas argues that the embrace of the digital in archives can only mitigate silences if archives tackle the issues of interface and robust discovery tools. Thomas also contends that the greatest present danger of archival silence is the Internet. Without clear and consistent strategies to create and maintain web archives, a huge gap will exist in the historical record that will severely misrepresent the current era.

This book is an engaging gateway into the complex issue of silences in the archival record. Archivists and historians will find this helpful for thinking about their interactions with archives and how to make future archives more representative and inclusive. This volume is a great companion to Randall C. Jimerson’s *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* in that it also challenges archivists to think of the power they hold when collecting and the importance of collecting a broad range of voices and viewpoints. The authors do not present a checklist to follow to ensure that a robust historical record is collected, but rather suggest a way to think about our collections and the voices they may ignore. This book is a fantastic entry point into evaluating the inclusivity of archival collections and how to work toward a more comprehensive record.

Ashley Howdeshell
Assistant University Archivist
Loyola University Chicago