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What is Primary: Teaching Archival Epistemology and the Sources Continuum

Michael J. Paulus, Jr.

In his short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges narrates the discovery of a world that initially exists in an encyclopedia fabricated by a secret society. But over time, through books and artifacts, the imaginary Tlön begins to break into the material world of the story. Borges, who both labored and luxuriated in libraries, here and elsewhere “persistently returned to the archive as his primary metaphor.”¹ Through his explorations of the relationship between representation and reality, Borges reminds us that the archive, broadly defined as the repository of human time, is not inviolable. Those of us who work in concrete archives are aware of the evidential and epistemological issues that pertain to the materials that are in our repositories. Because of our specific knowledge about the potential utility of these materials for research and our general knowledge about the sources of knowledge, archives and special collections are ideal laboratories for teaching and learning about the complexities of accessing and analyzing “the raw material of history,” or what we commonly refer to as primary sources.² Using examples drawn from a variety of undergraduate courses in which archival and special collections have been used, this chapter explores the complex concept of primary sources and introduces a model that can be used to help determine the primacy of sources of knowledge.

AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE ARCHIVE³

Primary sources are typically explained by differentiating them from secondary or derived sources.⁴ But

once such a distinction is made, it must be qualified immediately: definitions vary across disciplines; most sources are mixed; and the answers sources present depend on the questions being asked of them. An early twentieth-century book about teaching history in primary and secondary schools offered this helpful example: “John Fiske’s account of what happened at Lexington, April 19, 1775, is a primary source for determining John Fiske’s conception of the events at Lexington; it is a derived source for obtaining information about the events themselves.”⁵ The definition of what is primary ultimately will be determined by research questions, disciplinary methodologies, and course and peer expectations.

All of this may be obvious to an experienced researcher. A professor of religion once told me that a primary source was like pornography—he knew it when he saw it. But how clearly is the contingent nature of sources grasped by undergraduate students? And how consistent are we when we teach students about them? A recent study of “primary source literacy” revealed that while undergraduate students “exhibited a basic understanding of the distinction between primary and secondary sources, they generally failed to grasp that some sources could not be so easily defined.” This study’s authors concluded that students need “a more nuanced understanding of primary sources.”⁶ Students would also be helped by a more nuanced articulation of a concept that is taught inconsistently, if not incoherently.⁷ But rather than obtaining a competency that enables an artificial bifurcation between abstract notions of primary and secondary sources, the real

capability that students need to cultivate concerns understanding the nature of the sources of knowledge. This involves an understanding of evidence (what we know) as well as of epistemology (how we know what we know). These issues can be explored by introducing students to unique and rare materials that may function as primary sources and by providing students with a framework that enables them to understand the affordance of primariness or primacy.

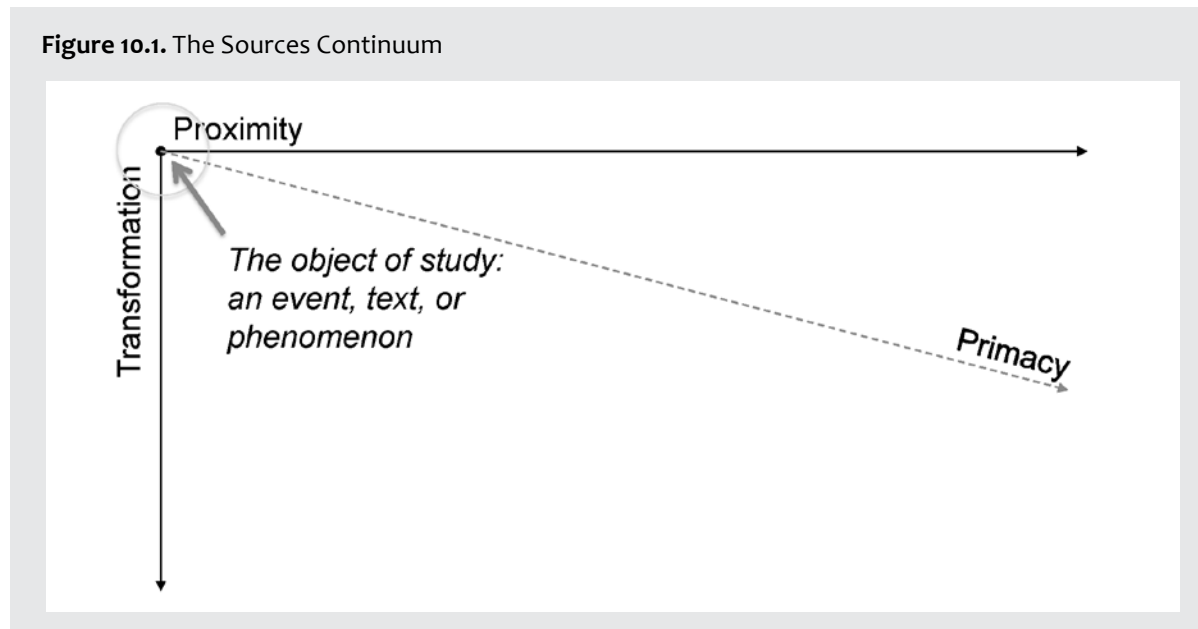
THE SOURCES CONTINUUM

After a number of years teaching undergraduate students about archives and special collections at a small liberal arts college—through basic presentations about materials and how to access them as well as through in-depth assignments and research projects that involved using them—I abandoned attempts to ask and answer the question about what a primary source is and instead began discussing the interrelationship between research questions and sources. With a question in mind, one can begin to think about the sources of knowledge that may exist and about which of these, based on certain qualities, may be primary. Whatever sources are extant and

available will then shape the research process. Out of a number of discussions and exercises, a model emerged that provided a framework for exploring and conceptualizing the primacy of sources (see figure 10.1). This model, the sources continuum, is a two-dimensional continuum that extends out from an event, text, or phenomenon—from whatever the object of study is. The X axis represents temporal and spatial proximity; the Y axis represents transformation of either content or form.⁸ Within this continuum, sources can be plotted and analyzed within the context of time, distance, and change. The sources continuum can be used at the beginning of the research process, to conceptualize the sources of knowledge that may exist, and it can be used when one has sources in hand, to organize and analyze the evidential value or accuracy of sources.

Manifestations of ancient texts provide excellent examples of how this continuum can be used to represent the transmission and transformation of texts and information from antiquity into the present. First-year students at Whitman College often read, as part of a core curriculum, modern editions of ancient texts such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Bible. In an effort to supplement the close read-

Figure 10.1. The Sources Continuum



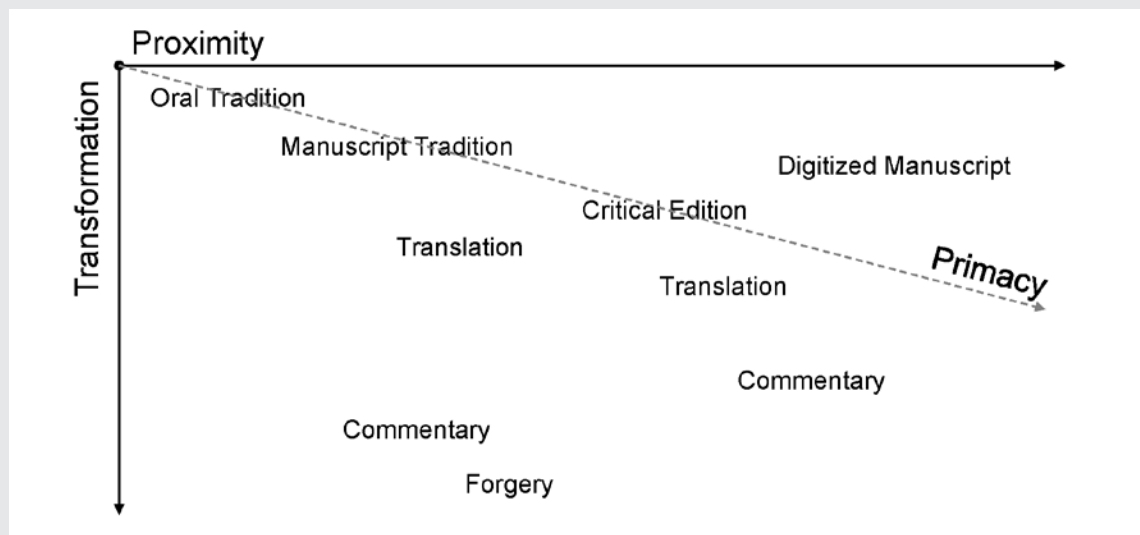
ing of texts with an introduction to the history of books, I presented materials—cuneiform tablets, manuscript codices, early printed books—and lectured about the transition from orality to literacy, the transition from manuscript to print culture, and textual criticism. Assuming an event, historical or performed, behind an ancient text, one moves across the horizontal axis of the continuum as the event is represented and re-represented over time. At the same time, one moves down the vertical axis of the continuum as that event is transformed through representation and interpretation. The quality of primacy usually weakens with time and distance from the event; it weakens even more rapidly as communications about the event are transformed. Figure 10.2 represents how an ancient event could be chronologically succeeded by a series of manifestations—an oral tradition, a manuscript tradition, an unreliable commentary, a vernacular translation, a manuscript forgery, a critical edition, a dynamic or non-literal translation, a good commentary, and a digitized manuscript—and how these could vary in terms of transformation and, consequently, primacy. Judgments have to be made about the extent to which each manifestation has been transformed,

but as one goes through this evaluative process one begins to get a sense of what may function as primary and the limitations of accessible sources due to lack, loss, or language. For an undergraduate course, a good translation based on a critical edition may suffice as a primary source (and such texts are described as such in the Whitman College *Catalog*⁹), but students should be aware of their dependence on translators, editors, and others. To illustrate further how the sources continuum can be used for teaching undergraduate students, I will provide examples from a variety of disciplines under three broad topics: the relationship between meaning and materiality; the relationship between events and evidence; and the difficulties of digital documents.

FROM TEXTS TO BOOKS

Humanities scholarship may be concerned primarily with texts, but, as Jonathan Rose points out, “The problem with focusing on texts is that no one can read a text—not until it is incarnated in the material form of a book.”¹⁰ In an attempt to connect artifactual literacy with information literacy, I incorporated into the introductory library class at Whitman an exercise

Figure 10.2. Manifestations of an Ancient Text



that had students study the material aspects of rare books.¹¹ I introduced Robert Darnton's communications circuit, to illustrate how books are produced and disseminated, and then I had each student spend time with a book (with an interesting publishing history) and answer questions about the book's who (creators), what (genre and subject), where (location), when (date), why (function), and for whom (audience).¹² The students then shared some of their answers and I explained how books have a dual nature—a body and soul, container and contents—and how each book and our knowledge of it is shaped by processes from publication through reception. Situated within the sources continuum, these material artifacts can be seen as products of transformative processes that unfold through time, as written manuscripts become printed books, which may then be reedited and republished. This exercise was useful in literature classes, too, and both models were helpful when I was simply exhibiting single books from Whitman's collection, such as a first edition of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (for a biology class) or the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (for an art history class).

Another example of how materiality shapes meaning involves an exercise and assignment that I used in an English class on Restoration and eighteenth-century drama. Students were asked to compare the texts of plays in their textbooks with printed plays from the eighteenth century. Since the textbook consisted of composite "modernized" editions without dedications, prefaces, lists of actors and actresses, and ("in the main") prologues and epilogues, the students discovered many things about the performances and early publications of plays that they were studying.¹³ The sources continuum provides a framework for showing the progression from performance to publication, and from contemporaneous printings to modern(ized) editions that nobody in the past had even heard or read.

FROM EVENTS TO EVIDENCE

Connected with the relationship between materiality

and meaning is the relationship between evidence and events. When an event is the object of inquiry, the sources continuum can be used to imagine, organize, and analyze potential sources. In a general studies class at Whitman called *Critical Voices*, which examined "the historical and ideological roles played by 'others,'" students attended an archival orientation session to explore regional history through historical manuscripts.¹⁴ Each student was given a different type of document (certificate, photograph, map, scrapbook, etcetera) to study and was asked to share something interesting about it. Collectively, the documents provided a chronology of historical events, many of which are unevenly documented, and through discussions about each document students became aware of the region's history, related material that is extant (and not) in the archives, and how such sources could be used in their class research projects. Using the sources continuum, events and related sources could be represented in a manner that facilitated discussions about the lack of certain sources, such as oral traditions, and the absence or asymmetry of evidence surrounding many activities.

Historical manuscripts were also part of the introductory library class at Whitman. In an exercise similar to the rare book exercise described above, I had each student study a different type of document and answer questions about its who (creators), what (form and subject), where (location), when (date), why (function), and for whom (audience). As the students shared what they had discovered, I drew their attention to the distinctive material formats of what they were seeing and touching and we discussed how messages and media are related. I would also explain how the authenticity and accuracy of sources can be assessed by looking at both the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of records, and by considering the processes that created and preserved them. In addition to information and artifactual literacies, I attempted to incorporate a broad historical sensibility into the session, and I used this exercise in history and religion classes as well.

The sources continuum brings these content, container, and context literacies together. A particularly rich example involves the killing of the missionaries after whom Whitman College is named. On November 29, 1847, Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and a number of others were killed by a group of Cayuse Indians at their mission site near present-day Walla Walla, Washington. The historiography surrounding this event is complicated and contentious, and the variety of sources related to it presents numerous challenges for anyone seeking to understand what happened. One historian cataloged twenty-four eyewitness and contemporary accounts of the attack and the subsequent month-long captivity. Some of these were reduced to writing within a few days of the events, others were recorded many years later, and many of these latter records were the memories of those who had been children at the time of the events. Additionally, some early records were created by individuals who were not present but were in the area and connected with the events in some way. And then there are the Cayuse accounts and traditions of what happened, some of which were recorded at a trial in 1850 and others that were transmitted orally.¹⁵ The sources continuum provides a way of arranging these accounts and other sources—in the form of letters, reports, depositions, memoirs, and interviews inscribed and reinscribed on various media—chronologically, and it reveals the interpretive moves involved in determining degrees of transformation. Deciding what is primary is a matter of many such moves.

DIGITAL DOCUMENTS

When I teach students to attend to the dualistic nature of books and records, I point out that such analysis is applicable to digital documents as well. As individuals and institutions increasingly make useful digital materials publicly available, such un-vetted sources require sophisticated levels of analysis. Online, the authority once bestowed on physical libraries and archives is often transferred to

a discovery system.¹⁶ While neither physical repositories nor discovery tools are, in the context of this discussion, sources, the materials found in physical libraries and archives are often self-authenticating or documented in such a way that authenticity can be validated or investigated. In a virtual environment, however, where we have “archives in the wild,” authenticity and accuracy are harder to establish.¹⁷ In a primary sources seminar at Whitman, a colleague and I used the sources continuum to illustrate how digital data sets precede research articles and also to explore transmission issues related to documents disseminated by WikiLeaks.¹⁸

Even in a curated environment, since we can only preserve *access* to digital documents and not the documents themselves, there is only access to simulacra.¹⁹ What, for example, is the original inscription of an email? The completed copy residing in the sender’s computing system or the recipient’s (not to mention the copies stored at intermediate locations)?²⁰ All of these copies may be distinguishable chronologically, on a very precise timescale, but the email may not undergo any traceable transformation. If, however, the email is converted or migrated to a different format, some of the original characteristics of the email (e.g., metadata, formatting, attachments) may be lost. As with physical books and records, the sources continuum can be used to conceptualize how digital documents move and are transformed through time. As the availability of supplementary research data—in the form of data sets, raw records, and gray literature—increases in all disciplines, and as new cross-disciplinary methodologies emerge, opportunities for teaching students to work with digital documents as sources will increase.

CONCLUSION

In our so-called digital age, when we must increasingly contend with the “inherent instability of texts,” the ability to “think like an archivist or special collections librarian” is a valuable critical skill.²¹ Teaching

students to differentiate between abstract qualities of primary and secondary sources—or, worse, holding up archetypal forms of primary sources such as newspapers²²—is an inadequate competency. Archives and special collections, as repositories of unique and rare materials that are curious and complex, sometimes correct and sometimes corrupt, can function as sites of learning about the nature and use of primary materials and their role in the construction and transmission of knowledge. The sources continuum provides a productive framework for teachers and students working with artifacts and representations from and about the past. Once students have a sense of what types of primary sources are and are not available and an appreciation of the evidential and epistemological issues associated with them, they will be better prepared to identify, select, and interpret appropriate sources for their research. And their research, in turn, will be shaped by a deeper understanding of what can be known and how it can be known. Teaching students a sophisticated understanding of primary sources is a unique contribution that archives and special collections can make to undergraduate education.

NOTES

- Jane Taylor, "Holdings: Refiguring the Archive," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 244.
- Jill Lepore, *Encounters in the New World: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.
- This phrase comes from Matthew P. Brown, *The Pilgrim and the Bee: Reading Rituals and Book Culture in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 203: "I mean a study of not only what we know from the evidential record ... but also how we know what we know."
- For the relevant information literacy standard, Standard One, see *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Chicago, Ill.: American Library Association, 2000), 8.
- Henry Johnson, *Teaching of History in Elementary and Secondary Schools* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922), 4.
- Joanne Archer et al., "Investigating Primary Source Literacy," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 35 (2009): 414, 419.
- Emmett Lombard, "Primary and Secondary Sources," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36 (2010): 251-53.
- The use of "transformation" here is comparable to the use of the word in copyright law, when "raw material [is] transformed in the creation of new information, new aesthetics, new insights and understandings." Pierre N. Leval, "Toward a Fair Use Standard," *Harvard Law Review* 103 (1990): 1111.
- The Catalog: 2010-2011* (Walla Walla, Wash.: Whitman College, 2010), 38.
- Jonathan Rose, "From Book History to Book Studies," http://www.printinghistory.org/programs/awards/awards_2001; David Beard, "From Work to Text to Document," *Archival Science* 8 (2008): 217-26.
- This class, Library 100, is an elective, one-credit course that teaches information literacy skills to first- and second-year students. See *The Catalog*, 117.
- Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books," in *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 182.
- "Procedures," in *The Broadview Anthology of Restoration & Early Eighteenth-Century Drama*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield and Maja-Lisa Von Sneidern (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2001), xx.
- The Catalog*, 38.
- Clifford M. Drury, *Marcus and Narcissa Whitman and the Opening of Old Oregon*, Vol. 2 (Glendale, Calif.: A. H. Clark Co., 1973), 224, 387-89.
- A recent study revealed that many young adults perceive search engines as credible sources. Eszter Hargittai et al., "Trust Online: Young Adults' Evaluation of Web Content," *International Journal of Communication* 4 (2010), 483, <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/636/423>.
- Jeremy L. John et al., *Digital Lives: Personal Digital*

- Archives for the 21st Century: An Initial Synthesis*, Version 0.2 (2010), vii, <http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/files/digital-lives-synthesis02-1.pdf>.
18. This class, Library 300, is an elective, one-credit course that “uses archival materials to help [third-year] students prepare to undertake significant primary source research as part of their senior thesis.” *The Catalog*, 117.
 19. “[A] digital document, because its perceptible form is always being manufactured just-in-time, on the spot, can’t ever sever its relationship to a set of manufacturing technologies. It requires an elaborate set of technological conditions—hardware and software—in order to maintain a visible and useful presence.” David M. Levy, *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (Arcade Publishing, 2001), 152.
 20. Geoffrey Yeo, “‘Nothing is the Same As Something Else’: Significant Properties and Notions of Identity and Originality,” *Archival Science* 10 (2010): 106.
 21. Robert Darnton, “The Information Landscape,” in *The Case for Books*, 23; Magia G. Krause, “‘It Makes History Alive for Them’: The Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36 (2010): 409-10.
 22. Darnton warns, “[N]ewspapers should be read for information about how contemporaries construed events, rather than for reliable knowledge of events themselves.” “The Information Landscape,” 27.