

Disrupt or be Disrupted: Archives, Records and Memory in Troubled Times

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Contributions for this special issue were received from both academics and practitioners. Almost all the papers for this special issue were presented at the annual conference of the South African Society of Archivists, hosted in Kimberley from 8–10 September 2021. The conference was hosted with financial support by the National Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences. The theme of the conference was “Disrupt or be Disrupted: Archives, Records and Memory in the COVID-19 era.”

Although we received a number of manuscripts, only eight papers were selected for this issue, covering diverse sub-themes ranging from education, disruptive technologies that drive the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), to management and access of archives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme is relevant, as it comes at a time when the archival profession faces many challenges. The proliferation of information technology has brought a lot of changes, not only on archival preservation and access, but also on the roles and expectations of archivists. As an archivist, one is expected to do more and more with fewer and fewer resources. With the looming 4IR in the global periphery, there is a real danger that the archival profession will be left behind if we persist in the old role of the traditional archivist. So, it is important that we too disrupt the situation, thereby making sure that we are not disrupted.

Disruption is all about an event, activity or process causing a disturbance or a problem. Disruption is on all of our minds these days, within and outside of the archival profession, and it can also be seen as a thread running through the papers in this special issue covering topics such as the implementation of various disruptive technologies, curriculum development, provision of access to archives and records during the pandemic, and more. Indeed, the disruptions that affect the work of archivists and records managers arise from the ubiquitous and rapidly changing technology of records creation, storage and distribution—specifically the affordances of the 4IR compounded by the “covidulation” of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. This, too, has shown us that, indeed, there is a silver lining in every cloud. As much as the virus has



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killed many of our brothers and sisters (may their souls rest in eternal peace), it has also accelerated the use of technology and the 4IR.

It should, however, be noted that disruptions brought about by changing technology or pandemics are not new; hence, the rabbi from the Book of Wisdom reckons that “Everything that is, has been.” Therefore, we have to look back in order to move forward. When King Solomon wrote the statement, he was emphasising the cyclic nature of human life on earth and the emptiness of living only for the “rat race.” In line with the statement, as archivists, we do what we have always been doing. The job does not change, but the media; hence, we should not be disrupted but rather disrupt.