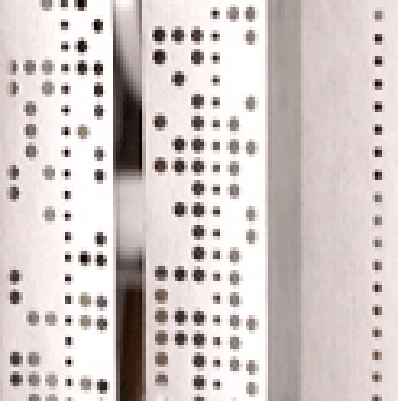
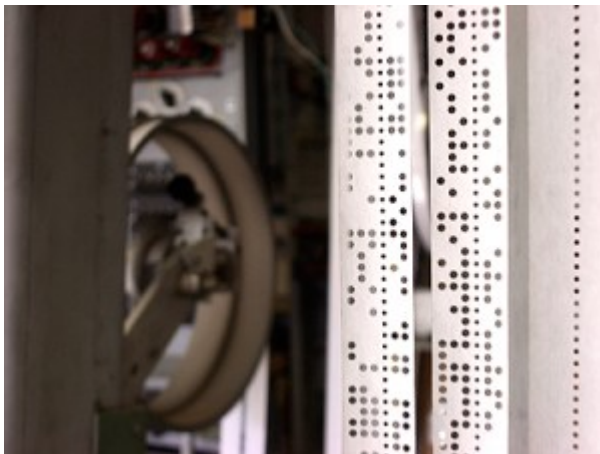




Derrida and WikiLeaks

Description

In his article *Archive Fever* Derrida suggests that the desire to *preserve* information is in some way a symptom of an inbuilt and unavoidable desire to destroy it. Drawing on Freud's concepts of the pleasure principle and the death drive, Derrida argues that an information store (archive) on the one hand involves a desire to safeguard information for the internal consumption and edification of the people holding on to it, but it also entails the need to reveal information to the outside world and for the benefit of others. Letting information out in some way destroys it.



Punch tape reader, Bletchley Park, UK

I have difficulty translating this insight to everyday understandings of information storage. Fragile manuscripts need eventually to be exposed to unregulated climatic conditions and the touch of human hands in order to be studied. There are risks in so exposing the physical archive. In order to conserve there's a sense in which you have to risk destroying the thing you want to conserve by exposing it to the outside world. Then there's the risk that comes from putting your information out to public view. Information can be copied and exploited by others. But I don't think Derrida was referring to the fragility of old documents or risk to one's claim on intellectual property in highlighting the destructive tendency inherent in the keeping of archives.

The supposed *contradiction* of the archive is well illustrated through the phenomenon of WikiLeaks. This very public revelation of secret government communications exposes a propensity within organisations and institutions to *keep* secrets. Institutions want and need to be secretive, to keep information hidden, as a way of preserving their authority. But government departments and private organisations also insist on *storing* those secrets, deliberately harbouring information they would rather not expose.

Institutions store records, memos, transcripts, emails, and “cable” messages in drawers, file boxes and on servers. Such incendiary documents are time bombs of an organization’s own making, kept officially and ready to be stumbled upon or leaked. Even if their exposure doesn’t bring the institutions that harbour these secrets tumbling down, they at least require the expenditure of labour to restore order, effect cover ups and re-instate the organization’s authority. The secrets on which the organisation depends entail huge risks and costs, but are after all essential for its operations.

So as well as “giving something a form,” information has its origins in the concept of the secret. Think of “to inform” as “to disclose incriminating evidence,” the first meaning outlined in the Oxford English Dictionary. The archive is a collection of secrets, some of which are essential, such as staff records, and some can be exposed for the organization’s benefit, as in the case of a database of e-books for purchase, or the Home Office’s instructions on how to get a passport. But some secrets can be lethally destructive of their hosts. I think Derrida is referring to this primary characteristic of information. At the core of the information concept is this tendency, if not the desire, to ruin and destroy, the opposite of educating, edifying and building up.

The revelations from the WikiLeaks website raises questions about the probity and trustworthiness we invest in leaders and organisations. Why must people say and do what they don’t want *everyone* to hear and see? Then there are the technologies and motivations at the disposal of those instigating the leaks. The revelations also raise questions about why those secrets are *stored* in the first place. Why are such records kept? The answer resides in the nature of organisations and institutions. We shouldn’t be so surprised when we reflect that no institution can survive without its secrets, and that concealment is at the heart of the information concept.

According to Derrida, “Nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word ‘archive,’ and this trouble is due to ‘the trouble of secrets, of plots, of clandestineness, of half-private, half-public conjurations, always at the unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society, and the State, between the family and an intimacy even more private than the family, between oneself and oneself’ (57). Neither should we be surprised that one of the weapons being deployed against the WikiLeaks figurehead Julian Assange is the exposure of his own apparent private indiscretions.

Notwithstanding JFK’s injunction, “The very word ‘secrecy’ is repugnant in a free and open society,” we need secrets, and institutions. According to philosopher John Caputo “Institutions are the way things get done, and they are prone to violence”! Nothing is innocent” (234).

References

Caputo, John D. 1987. *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutical Project*. Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press.

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