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## Archive and Database as Metaphor: Theorizing the Historical Record

Marlene Manoff

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### Abstract

Digital media increase the visibility and presence of the past while also reshaping our sense of history. We have extraordinary access to digital versions of books, journals, film, television, music, art and popular culture from earlier eras. New theoretical formulations of database and archive provide ways to think creatively about these changes to the cultural and historical record. This essay explores the ways in which the current digital environment can be theorized in terms of, what I call, its archival effects.



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## Introduction

Our relation to history is being transformed by digital media that increase the presence of the past and that remake our connection to both past and present. New theorizations of archive and database enable us to think productively about the nature of digital objects and the ways in which they alter cultural memory and historical transmission. This paper analyses the growing theoretical literature on the complex and contradictory effects of digital archives and their implications for the historical record and the future of libraries.

## Archive and Database as Metaphor

When scholars outside library and archival science use the word "archive" or when those outside information technology fields use the word "database," they almost always mean something broader and more ambiguous than experts in these fields using those same words. The disciplinary boundaries within which these terms have been contained are eroding. Scholars use the terms metaphorically, appropriating them from the professional experts.<sup>1</sup> Some writers exploring the concepts of archive and database begin with standard dictionary definitions. Archive is defined as "a place in which public records

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2715 North Charles Street  
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
+1 (410) 516-6989  
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