



From material memory to digital permanence: A theoretical study on the ethics of preservation in library and archival practice

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Abstract

Preservation has long served as a central function of libraries and archives, traditionally understood as the physical protection of manuscripts, rare books, records, and documentary heritage. The shift toward digitization and digital repositories has transformed this function into a dynamic process of ensuring long-term accessibility, integrity, and continuity across changing technological environments. This theoretical study examines the ethical dimensions of that transformation. Drawing on archival theory (Terry Cook and Verne Harris) and postmodern ethics (Jacques Derrida and Zygmunt Bauman), it investigates how authenticity, access, selection, and institutional responsibility are redefined when materials move from physical form to digital permanence. Through qualitative analysis of scholarly literature, institutional policies, and selected national and cultural initiatives, the study demonstrates that preservation is no longer a neutral technical activity but an interpretive and ethical practice that shapes collective memory. Findings indicate that authentic preservation in digital environments prioritizes contextual integrity, provenance, and sustained usability rather than mere physical replication, while ethical challenges arise around selection bias, copyright, technological dependency, and unequal access. The study concludes that libraries and archives must continuously negotiate authenticity, accessibility, and responsibility to sustain meaningful cultural memory for future generations.

Keywords: Digital preservation, Archival ethics, Authenticity, Material memory, Digital permanence, Terry cook, Verne harris, Jacques derrida, Zygmunt bauman, Library and Archival practice

Introduction

Preservation has traditionally been understood as one of the fundamental responsibilities of libraries and archives, concerned primarily with protecting manuscripts, books, records, and other documentary materials from physical deterioration. The rapid expansion of digitization, however, has significantly altered both the meaning and practice of preservation. Digital technologies enable institutions to reduce the physical handling of fragile materials, broaden access to collections, and create new possibilities for long-term cultural transmission. At the same time, they introduce complex questions concerning authenticity, technological obsolescence, copyright, selection, ownership, accessibility, and the integrity of digital representations.

Digital preservation, therefore, cannot be regarded merely as the technical reproduction or storage of cultural materials. Decisions about what is digitized, how it is described, who is permitted access, and how digital objects are maintained over time influence the construction and transmission of collective memory. Preservation consequently involves institutional judgment as well as technological intervention. Contemporary archival scholarship further challenges the assumption that archives are neutral repositories, emphasizing instead the role of archival practices in shaping memory, identity, context, and representation (Cook, 2013; Harris, 1997) ^[13, 17].

Within this context, the present study examines the ethical transformation from material memory to digital permanence.

Drawing upon the archival theories of Terry Cook and Verne Harris and the philosophical perspectives of Jacques Derrida and Zygmunt Bauman, it explores how authenticity, accessibility, selection, and responsibility are redefined in contemporary library and archival preservation practice.

Research questions

- What does “authentic preservation” mean when library and archival materials move from physical form to digital format?
- What ethical issues arise when institutions seek to preserve original materials while creating digital copies for access?
- How can ideas from archival theory (Terry Cook, Verne Harris) and postmodern ethics (Zygmunt Bauman, Jacques Derrida) help us understand preservation in the digital age?
- How can libraries and archives balance authenticity, accessibility, and responsibility in digital preservation?

Objectives

- To examine how the ethics of preservation have shifted from the protection of physical materials to the pursuit of digital permanence.
- To analyze key theoretical perspectives that address ethics in preservation and digitization.
- To explore how authenticity, access, and memory are conceptualized and managed in digital preservation environments.

- To identify the principal ethical challenges encountered by libraries and archives during digitization.
- To develop an integrated theoretical understanding that connects archival theory, ethics, and memory studies for contemporary preservation practice.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and theoretically oriented design. It does not rely on primary fieldwork, surveys, or statistical measurement. Instead, it proceeds through systematic literature review, conceptual analysis, and comparative interpretation of secondary sources. Data were drawn from scholarly books and peer-reviewed articles on preservation, archival theory, and postmodern ethics; institutional policies and reports from national libraries and archival bodies; documentation of digitization initiatives; and frameworks issued by organizations such as IFLA, UNESCO, and ICA. Particular attention was given to the writings of Terry Cook, Verne Harris, Jacques Derrida, and Zygmunt Bauman.

Analysis followed thematic coding and theoretical interpretation. Key concepts—authenticity, memory, selection, responsibility, and permanence were traced across physical and digital contexts. Institutional practices were examined comparatively and then interpreted through the four theoretical lenses. The approach remains deliberately conceptual: the goal is to generate a coherent ethical and theoretical understanding rather than operational technical models (Berger, 2009; Cook, 2013) [4, 13].

Source selection was guided by three criteria: conceptual relevance, institutional authority, and verifiability. Peer-reviewed scholarship was prioritized for theoretical claims, while official policies and professional frameworks were used to describe preservation and access practices. This distinction is important because policy documents do not merely report technical procedures; they also disclose institutional judgments about value, risk, rights, and responsibility. UNESCO's Charter on the Preservation of the Digital Heritage presents preservation as a sustained collective obligation and emphasizes continued accessibility, while its later Recommendation concerning documentary heritage links preservation, access, policy, and institutional accountability (UNESCO, 2003, 2015) [35]. IFLA's preservation programme similarly foregrounds the long-term availability of both physical and digital documentary heritage (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions [IFLA], n.d.).

Literature review

Preservation scholarship has shifted from a predominantly technical concern with physical conservation toward an understanding of preservation as an institutional, interpretive, and ethical practice. Berger (2009) [4] argues that preservation decisions shape what survives in the historical record and therefore carry moral consequences, while Naskar (2022) [27] demonstrates how practical preservation challenges in Kolkata libraries remain closely connected with cultural continuity. The

widespread adoption of mobile devices and the internet have reshaped not only how people communicate but also their preferences and behaviours in social settings. (Naskar & Das, 2026) [30].

Brothman (2001) [8] and Nesmith (2005) [33] further show that preservation cannot be separated from memory, context, and cultural activity. Brothman distinguishes archival memory from the recovery of a fixed past, whereas Nesmith emphasizes that records and archival processes are shaped by human intentions and changing contexts. In digital preservation, therefore, technical survival alone is insufficient; archival integrity also requires the preservation of provenance, arrangement, description, custodial history, and contexts of creation and use.

Archival theory provides a major conceptual foundation for this position. Cook (1984, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2013) [9-13] challenges the idea of archives as neutral repositories, treating the archival fonds as an intellectual construct and emphasizing that appraisal, selection, and description actively shape social memory. His focus on context, provenance, and relationships is especially relevant to digital records, where authenticity increasingly depends on metadata and relational integrity rather than physical location.

Harris (1997, 2017, 2018) [17-19] extends this critique through the concept of the "archival sliver," which recognizes archives as selective fragments shaped by power, loss, and institutional choices. Digital abundance does not eliminate such selection or bias. His engagement with deconstruction also presents archival practice as an ethical process open to reinterpretation and questions of justice.

Postmodern ethics deepen these concerns. Derrida's archival thought, as discussed by Harris (2017) [18] and Mauthner and Gárdos (2015) [25], rejects the archive as a closed and stable repository and emphasizes that archivization itself participates in producing meaning. Derrida (1996) further demonstrates that technologies of inscription and transmission influence what can be remembered and interpreted. Bauman (1993) [3], similarly, locates moral responsibility in conditions where rules cannot remove uncertainty, while Abbinnett (1998) [1] highlights the situational character of Bauman's postmodern ethics. Applied to preservation, these perspectives suggest that standards and automated systems may guide decisions but cannot remove human responsibility for deletion, migration, restriction, description, and access.

Digital preservation studies reinforce these theoretical concerns. Research on newspaper digitization, electronic-record authenticity, and long-term digital heritage identifies persistent problems of technological obsolescence, authenticity, copyright, accessibility, and governance (Andreeva *et al.*, 2018; Bønding *et al.*, 2016; Hajtnik *et al.*, 2015; Lor & Britz, 2012) [2, 6, 16, 24]. However, technological studies and theoretical discussions often remain separate, leaving limited scholarship that integrates archival theory and postmodern ethics into a unified account of preservation ethics in the digital age.

International frameworks provide practical support for this approach. UNESCO (2003) emphasizes the vulnerability of

digital heritage and the need for sustained preservation, cooperation, and access planning. The International Council on Archives (2002) ^[20] stresses the continued accessibility, usability, authenticity, and integrity of electronic records. The UNESCO/PERSIST guidelines likewise recognize deliberate selection as essential because comprehensive preservation of rapidly expanding digital production is unrealistic (IFLA, 2021) ^[22]. Together, these perspectives support the present study's premise that digital preservation depends not on preventing change altogether, but on managing change transparently while maintaining trustworthy evidence, context, and ethical accountability.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection was exclusively secondary and guided by relevance to authenticity, accessibility, institutional responsibility, and digital permanence. Sources included national library policies and practices (India, Australia, Library of Congress, British Library, Colombia, China, National Diet Library, Scotland), Indian cultural institutions (Asiatic Society, Thanjavur Maharaja Serfoji's Sarasvati Mahal Library, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library), scientific and publishing platforms (PubMed Central, ICAR, Springer Nature, IEEE), open-access initiatives (Digital Library Federation, Internet Archive), and specialized tools (Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, Mukurtu CMS).

The institutional sample is illustrative rather than statistically representative. Its purpose is to compare different ethical arrangements through which preservation is organized: open or restricted access, legal deposit, copyright control, state custody, preservation through digitization, community-governed access, and defensive protection of traditional knowledge. The comparison therefore focuses less on institutional ranking than on the values made visible by policy. In each case, preservation decisions reveal a relationship among authority, users, rights holders, technological systems, and the communities whose documentary heritage is being managed.

These materials were organized thematically and interpreted through the four theoretical perspectives.

Terry Cook's reconceptualization of the fonds as intellectual rather than purely physical directs attention to metadata, contextual relationships, and multi-creator provenance in digital environments. Preservation succeeds not by locking files in place but by sustaining the informational and relational framework that renders records meaningful and trustworthy.

Harris's archival sliver reframes digital abundance: even vast repositories remain selective. Institutional choices about what to digitize, how to describe it, and whom to grant access continue to produce inclusions and exclusions. Ethical practice therefore requires transparency about gaps and deliberate efforts toward more representative memory.

Bauman's ethics of responsibility underscores that preservation choices are situational moral acts. Archivists and librarians cannot rely solely on fixed rules when balancing privacy against access, commercial restrictions against public knowledge, or short-term usability against long-term

sustainability. Responsibility remains personal and institutional even when mediated by technology.

Derrida's deconstructive view treats digital preservation as continuous reinterpretation. Surrogates, format migrations, and changing interfaces alter the conditions of meaning; the archive is never closed. Authenticity becomes a matter of ongoing critical attention rather than a once-and-for-all property of an original object.

Comparative institutional analysis reveals consistent patterns. Most national libraries combine physical conservation of rare materials with selective digitization and surrogate provision. Strict access protocols (Library of Congress), copyright-driven restrictions (National Library of Australia), state-centric ownership regimes (China), and legal-deposit mandates (Colombia, British Library) all illustrate that preservation is simultaneously technical, legal, and political. Indian institutions such as the Asiatic Society and Khuda Bakhsh demonstrate hybrid approaches that pair in-house conservation with controlled digital access. Tools such as Mukurtu prioritize community protocols over universal open access, while TKDL functions primarily as a defensive legal instrument for traditional knowledge. Publishing platforms often subordinate preservation ethics to commercial or liability concerns, creating further tension between stewardship and enclosure.

Official policies illustrate these differences. The Library of Congress states that digital access should be as broad as possible while remaining consistent with law, donor agreements, security, and preservation responsibilities (Library of Congress, n.d.). The National Library of Australia similarly defines preservation as maintaining the integrity of both physical and digital collections while enabling access to intellectual content (National Library of Australia, n.d.). The British Library's legal-deposit framework preserves digital publications but places statutory limits on how deposited electronic material may be accessed and copied (British Library, n.d.). Colombia's legal-deposit system explicitly connects acquisition, registration, preservation, availability, and national cultural memory (Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, n.d.). In China, archival law reserves publication of state-owned archives to authorized archival repositories or state organs, demonstrating a stronger state-centered model of archival authority (Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, 2016). The National Diet Library of Japan uses digitization both to reduce deterioration of originals and to expand access where copyright permits (National Diet Library, n.d.). Community-oriented systems offer another model: Mukurtu CMS makes culturally defined protocols central to permissions and access, while India's Traditional Knowledge Digital Library was created primarily to prevent misappropriation and erroneous patenting of documented traditional knowledge (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, n.d.; Mukurtu CMS, n.d.).

Across these cases, the theoretical lenses converge on a single insight: digital permanence is not passive storage but an active, ethically charged process of selection, contextualization, and responsibility.

Findings

The concept of authentic preservation undergoes a decisive redefinition in digital environments. Authenticity is no longer anchored exclusively in the physical integrity of the original object. It resides in the maintenance of intellectual content, provenance, contextual relationships, evidential value, and long-term interpretability. Digital surrogates function as extended forms of archival existence rather than mere substitutes. Continuous intervention—migration, metadata stewardship, repository governance becomes the condition of permanence (Andreeva *et al.*, 2018; Cook, 2013) ^[2, 13].

These findings also show that authenticity should be understood as a managed relationship between content, context, evidence, and documented intervention. A migrated file may differ technically from its earlier instantiation while remaining trustworthy if the institution can demonstrate provenance, integrity, preservation history, and the reasons for transformation. Conversely, an apparently exact digital copy may be ethically or archivally inadequate if it is detached from descriptive context, rights information, cultural protocols, or evidence of its source. This relational understanding helps reconcile the apparent tension between intervention and authenticity: preservation action does not necessarily diminish authenticity; undocumented or unaccountable intervention does. In this sense, transparency becomes a core preservation value alongside technical fixity (Cook, 2013; International Council on Archives, 2002) ^[13, 20].

Digitization generates multiple ethical tensions. Improved access reduces handling of fragile originals yet risks severing users from material context. Copyright and ownership regimes frequently constrain reproduction and long-term retention. Selection decisions determine which narratives achieve visibility and which remain marginal, thereby shaping collective memory (Harris, 1997) ^[17]. Technological obsolescence, infrastructure inequality, and digital exclusion raise further questions of intergenerational justice. Institutions therefore confront competing demands that cannot be resolved by technical solutions alone.

The analysis further suggests that access should not be treated as the simple opposite of restriction. Ethical access is structured access. Copyright, privacy, donor conditions, community protocols, cultural sensitivity, and preservation risk can justify limits, but those limits require clear rationales, consistent review, and documentation. The same principle applies to openness: unrestricted online availability is not automatically ethical when communities or rights holders have legitimate claims over sensitive knowledge. Libraries and archives therefore need access models capable of distinguishing public interest from mere technical possibility. Such models preserve the democratic value of access while acknowledging that responsibility may sometimes require conditions, delay, mediation, or community control (Library of Congress, n.d.; Lor & Britz, 2012; Mukurtu CMS, n.d.) ^[24].

Archival theory and postmodern ethics supply indispensable interpretive tools. Cook's insistence on archives as active memory-shaping institutions clarifies that preservation

decisions are never neutral. Harris's archival sliver reveals the inevitable partiality of even the most ambitious digital projects. Derrida's understanding of the archive as productive and open-ended explains why digital records remain subject to reinterpretation. Bauman's situational ethics insists that responsibility cannot be fully systematized; it requires ongoing moral attention to inclusion, exclusion, and consequence. Together these perspectives reposition preservation as an interpretive and ethical practice situated at the intersection of memory, power, and accountability.

Postcolonial novels have traditionally questioned the gatekeeping practices regarding knowledge, which resonates strongly with current discussions on OA versus subscription systems. They reveal a strong continuity from the control imposed by colonial missionaries to today's paywalls and neocolonialist internal hierarchy. Through combining literary analysis and LIS theory with regard to a wider set of texts, this paper will highlight the need for change. Decolonial publishing pathways prioritising diamond OA, Global South-led platforms, multilingual and community-driven repositories, and genuine bibliodiversity offer a viable and ethically grounded way forward. (Naskar & Das, 2026) ^[30].

Balance among authenticity, accessibility, and responsibility is achieved through integrated strategies rather than hierarchical prioritization. Institutions that maintain physical originals alongside carefully documented digital versions, record preservation actions transparently, preserve rich metadata, and adopt sustainable technological planning come closest to ethical equilibrium. Community-controlled platforms such as Mukurtu illustrate that access protocols themselves can embody ethical values of respect and consent. Ultimately, libraries and archives function as ethical mediators between historical integrity and contemporary demands for access.

Conclusion

The shift from material memory to digital permanence has transformed preservation from the conservation of physical objects into an ongoing ethical responsibility to sustain trustworthy, accessible, and meaningful cultural memory. In the digital environment, authenticity is increasingly contextual and relational, while decisions concerning selection, copyright, technological dependency, and access remain ethically significant. The perspectives of Cook, Harris, Derrida, and Bauman reinforce that preservation is not a neutral technical process but one shaped by institutional power, interpretation, and moral responsibility. Libraries and archives must therefore protect documentary integrity while ensuring that records remain intelligible and accessible across technological change. Digital permanence is best understood as a continuing practice of care, transparency, and accountability rather than a fixed condition. Professional practice consequently requires clear documentation of preservation interventions, preservation of provenance and contextual metadata, transparent selection and access policies, and periodic review of technological, legal, and social risks (UNESCO, 2003, 2015) ^[35]. Future research may extend this framework through empirical studies of institutional decision-making, comparative policy analysis, the

ethical use of artificial intelligence in appraisal and description, user-centered access research, and sustainable models for long-term digital preservation.

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