

“Documents are surrogates for us, they are extensions of ourselves. The best and the worst of ourselves can be found in them; our loves and hates, our destructiveness and our altruism, our honesty and our deceptiveness.”

- David M. Levy, in *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*, p. 38

## The Transformation of Personal Documentation Practices

Emerging technologies continually shape and reshape how family and personal archives are created, shared, and preserved. Archives “is a broad term that encompasses private and public collections of written works (diaries, state records, correspondence, newspapers), images (photographs, drawings, maps), sound recordings (song, story), artifacts, cultural objects, and more. Oral storytelling, shared memories, and family histories that have been passed on to descendants, whether or not they’ve been documented in writing, are also archival” (Wyld, 2025). According to Day (2014) it is not just experts that create documentation, for documents are created every day, by and about us. Briet’s concept of “homo-documentator” (2006) can be seen playing out in our everyday lives in the digital age - technologies “assimilate us like we assimilate them...a fellow *homo-documentator* that is...*more human* by being less so. Not just a ‘dumb beast’ of a person, nor a mere ‘parrot’ of ourselves either, but something more like us” (Day, 2014, p. 90). As William Barrett predicted, “the presuppositions of this technical world are so much the invisible medium of our actual life that we have become unconscious of them. We may eventually become so enclosed in them that we cannot even imagine any other way of thought but technical thinking” (Barrett, 1979, p. 223).

Within our personal lives and within families, we are continually engaged in the task of creating documents about ourselves, and hence of creating an archive of ourselves, whether we are cognizant of it, or whether we wish to, or not; we do so just by being. In the past several decades, much of this archiving has involved digital technologies in some form or another, whether for digitization of objects and artifacts, or for the digitalization of archival processes. In addition, we now have personal and family documents that are ‘born-digital’ or are ‘digital-first’ including emails, open web content, and networked social media content.

Artificial intelligence (AI) carries a lot of meanings, depending on the discipline. Crawford (2021) provides a visual of how AI would be described if

one were to ask someone on the street to provide a definition of AI. Crawford (2021) provides a visual of how AI would be defined if one were to ask someone on the street what Artificial Intelligence is. Crawford proceeds with an example on how the average person may respond, where many may mention that AI is Amazon Alexa, Apple's Siri, Google Home or ChatGPT. Yet several layers exist in the definition of artificial intelligence, and the answer may vary if you ask experts in machine learning, who will automatically give you a technical response. No matter the discipline, Crawford explains that the way we define AI will change over time. For this paper, we define AI in the context of archives as a tool used to automate digital recordkeeping and archival work (Rolan, et. al. 2019).

When it comes to the ethics of AI in the archives, it is reflected as a sociotechnical practice (Colavizza, et. al. 2021). Ethics involves trust and authenticity and is defined in the profession as a code of conduct or moral principle observed across the discipline (Society of American Archivists, Core Values of the Profession). When AI is used in the archives, ethical concerns arise. These concerns are caused by a lack of trust across the profession, due to the risk AI poses to archival data (Jalliant & Rees, 2022). The issue of trust and shared professional ethics goes beyond the common codes of the profession and as a result have become a widespread concern that archivists are grappling with. For now, as AI technologies evolve, archives must keep a close eye on the processing challenges and workflow issues ahead (Proctor, 2025).

As generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), based on Large Language Models (LLMs) is now web-based, accessible, and seemingly easy to use, they are automatically insinuated in much of our personal and family archives, whether purposive or not. Unlike other types of documentation or AI, they are “communicative artificial intelligence...whose intelligence emerges through their communicative exchanges with people rather than through coding alone...and [these] communicative events...are then taken as documents for further communication” (Day, 2014, p. 90). This transformation of documentation processes raises new questions about authenticity and continuity. Much of our personal and family archiving is happening automatically on our personal devices, where many people also use image manipulation software for fun and for sharing with others. Personal photos may be altered to present a self-image to an “imagined audience” (Litt, 2012), that could be described as a curated “presentation of self” (Goffman, 1959) to others on social media and elsewhere. Irrespective of whether one edits one’s own content, they are often automatically cataloged, indexed, archived, and

replicated everywhere on a platform or digital system and used for other purposes that are not transparent to the user. Many of these platforms are seemingly free to the user, but they operate just like any other old-fashioned media company, by selling advertising, except now, the user is also the product, becoming just a drop within the sea of so-called Big Data, although the phenomenon is not unique to our times (Oremus, 2018), although the sea is becoming an ocean.

AI is now also used for facial recognition and categorizes images automatically, based on millions of such real and manipulated images, and so who can say what is real and what is not, and who's who? Can these AI-manipulated images be considered documents as conceptualized by Bruno Latour – as immutable mobiles (Latour, 1986, p.7) – which have a fixity, stability, and unchangeability, function as stable evidence (Reyes et. al, 2024), “are talking things that...return the same answer over and over again” (Levy, 2001, p. 26) and are “able to endure self-identically through time” (Rivera, 2021, p. 154)? In this reflection, we look at the effects of AI on documents in our personal and family archives and the flow-on effects of AI for future archival collections.

## An Intergenerational Perspective

Together, the authors engaged in a structured exploration based on our personal experiences and our professional expertise, and examined how AI impacts personal and collective memory, preservation efforts, and the ethical concerns around personal archives. As GenAI becomes more accessible to anyone with digital online access, new questions arise about the authenticity, continuity, and transformation of our documents. The questions we asked of ourselves and each other are: How has AI changed our understanding of the authenticity of the documents in our personal and family archives? Do AI-generated narratives and images enhance or distort our family and collective memories? At the core of our exploration is our concern about the authenticity and sustainability of family memory in the digital age.

Our focus is on how AI-generated images and narratives can affect intergenerational knowledge transfer, specifically how different generations approach personal documentation and memory work, and what role AI plays (if any) in shaping these approaches, especially in light of creating, maintaining, or accessing personal and family archives, for “private memory traces inside human brains are prosthetically augmented by publicly accessible documents and associated document technologies” (Rivera, 2021). Drawing on the work of Schmidt and Muehlfeld (2017) on intergenerational

knowledge transfer, and the preservation versus transformation dilemma (Lischer-Katz, 2022), we examine how AI technologies impact documentation. We also consider ethical dilemmas of authenticity, bias, and ownership in AI-mediated archival practices (Hanna et al., 2024).

## Implications of Continual Auto-documentation

There are technologies to detect an AI-generated image, but how long before they become unreliable, as they are increasingly trained on manipulated images that are proliferating exponentially through every information ecosystem? Additionally, the fleeting nature of some of the auto-documentation that is continually generated on various platforms ( e.g., the fleeting “Stories” feature on Facebook, the “disappearing messages” on Whatsapp and Telegram), mean that the volume of this documentation quickly becomes unmanageable for a human, although AI-systems can still access and extract data from them to construe information about us. Much of this auto-documentation is unintentional, without a sense of human self-documentation performed with intentionality and agency as described by Olsen et al. (2012). The volume of seemingly personal documentation produced through this technology also raises archival questions around provenance, original order, retention and disposal, and fixity. Notions of *auto-documentation* and *self-documentation* get entangled in a network of distributed agencies with its own functional agency (Isen-Kristiansen & Lund, 2024). “To communicate with the environment, to be informed by the environment, humans need to make or experience a document, like a scream by a baby, a vocal discrete entity coming up as fast as it is dissolved. Documents are made and experienced all the time in many different ways by using many different means” (Isen-Kristiansen & Lund, 2024, p. 1). The below quotation by Lewis Carrol explains the problem of a map to a 1-1 scale, which is analogous to how many of our everyday technologies enable the continual mapping of every minute of our lives:

Mein Herr: “We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!”  
“Have you used it much?” I enquired.

“It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr: “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.”

- from Chapter 11 of *Sylvie and Bruno* by Lewis Carroll (from Project Gutenberg)

With minute-by-minute documentation of our lives, who will, after us, have the time or interest to sort through our digital archives? How can we find an instance or incident from our own life without us actively cataloging this auto-

documentation in some manner? There is no human agency within such an auto-document that resembles a human life but has no index or context for a human life, except perhaps a time stamp. In essence, it is like Borges' *Library of Babel* without a catalogue or an index. It simply becomes data for ingest into other machines to produce a documentary becoming of the subject rather than the subjective becoming of a document (Day, 2014). Instead of serving as evidence in proof of our lives, they become big data in service of an abstraction of human activities in a system of abstract exchange between machines feeding the commodification of our lives.

Other implications of such continual documentation of our lives is that without the context, the index, or an understanding of a document's "aboutness" (Fairthorne, 1969), which results from "our ability to reduce the information in text to manageable and therefore memorable portions ... [so] we are able to produce other discourses, or parts of discourses, expressing this aboutness in summaries, titles, conclusions, or pronouncements in any form" (Beghtol, 1996). With the vast amount of data that is now auto documented, it just becomes an endless and boundless sea without any such navigational compass, much like the Bellman's map from Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*:

He had bought a large map representing the sea,  
Without the least vestige of land:  
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be  
A map they could all understand.  
"What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,  
Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?"  
So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply  
"They are merely conventional signs!"  
"Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!  
But we've got our brave Captain to thank  
(So the crew would protest) "that he's bought us the best—  
A perfect and absolute blank!"

- From *The Hunting of the Snark* by Lewis Carroll (from Project Gutenberg)

Even half a century ago, one had to go to a photo studio on one's birthday or wedding or some such momentous occasion or hire a professional photographer to document those special moments. We also sent annual festival letters such as Christmas letters with all the family news and photos (Narayan et. al., 2024). We all have evidence of these in our family photo albums and our family archives. Now, these special days blur into every other day in our digital photo archives and our digital communications. When everything

is salient all the time, and vies equally for our attention and cognition, nothing remains in our memory.

## AI as an Unwanted Co-archivist

AI's role in shaping memory situates it within digital memory studies and critical archival theory. Archives can be both a tool of oppression and of liberation (Schwartz & Cook, 2002), for many traditional archival systems also replicate oppressive colonial structures that appropriate knowledge from the creators, be they individuals or communities. Similarly, the proliferation of AI results in a form of “technological colonialism” (Dobrin, 2024) wherein human life is being captured and controlled through the appropriation of data extracted by tech platforms for profit (Muldoon & Wu, 2023). On these platforms, “people become the training sets for their own mimicry – training sets for both the robots and for the human beings themselves in their relation to the robots” (Day, 2014. P. 91). For future users, these platforms and their outputs become access points of knowledge about themselves and their families. This also raises questions on how AI has changed our understanding of the authenticity and the intentionality of the documents in our personal and family archives. Do AI-generated narratives and images enhance or distort our family and collective memories? When AI-generated content enters the data sets it's trained on, the recursiveness introduces errors that build up with each succeeding generation of models (Rao, 2023).

Generative AI (GenAI) is rapidly reshaping how we create, preserve, and interpret documentation and memory, especially in personal and family contexts. Generative AI (GenAI) is rapidly reshaping how we create, preserve, and interpret personal and family documentation and memory, mostly unprompted. From passive recording to active co-creation, GenAI doesn't just record, it generates content. It can write narratives, summarize events, and even fabricate plausible memories based on fragments of data, blurring the line between authentic documentation and the verity of memory - what counts as “real” memory. When it comes to authenticity and continuity, Generative AI challenges traditional notions of truth and memory in profound and sometimes unsettling ways, due to the biases built into the data sets that it may train itself on. Hence, authenticity and ethical issues arise when AI intervenes in personal documentation. This means that any

Gen-AI-created content in the personal or family archive may also include these biases and will eventually corrupt historical archives.

Whether by choice or otherwise, there is a continual shift toward automated, ephemeral, and AI-assisted archiving, one where families are turning to AI for preserving memory. At the same time, AI may be an unwanted co-archivist - catering to our needs for self-representation and memory co-creation, making albums, adding music, creating often meaningless memories on our mobile phones such as “this day one year ago,” raising questions of ownership, accessibility, and the right to archives. Collectively, we believe that the tangible materiality of archives is becoming lost, while digital archives are becoming intangible in the cloud. In the end, have we lost control of our archives the minute they are created, in what is now known as the “digital reality”?

The impact of GenAI on personal documentation is not experienced uniformly across generations. Older adults may approach AI tools with caution or curiosity, while younger generations often engage with them seamlessly, sometimes without recognizing their archival implications. We call them careless archivists. This observation invites reflection on how memory, identity, and documentation practices are shaping generational contexts and altering generational memory, affecting how we distinguish genuine memories from synthetic creations.

The intersection of AI and personal memory invites us to reconsider what counts as a “document” and how to engage with digital artifacts critically when it comes to family documentation and beyond. In academic classrooms and public programming settings, we have observed how prompting can serve as a form of storytelling, prompting learners to navigate questions of authenticity, privacy, and emotional resonance. However, we also recognize the flaws in the results and the disappointment that comes with generating misrepresented information.

## Authenticity of Family Archives

AI has blurred boundaries between what is real and what is artificial and this can directly affect individuals' narratives as they find themselves dealing with AI as the co-archivist. AI technology is overcompensating in this sphere, thus allowing for the creation or alteration of family photos, letters, and journals. It is increasingly challenging for archival educators to teach students how to

distinguish between genuine memories and synthetic creations, particularly when the outputs are realistic.

The proliferation of GenAI tools has also introduced new tensions in personal and family documentation. For instance, AI-generated family photos may evoke emotional truth while lacking evidentiary fixity. Even the British Royal family is not immune to having their official family archives corrupted by AI generated images of its family members (Stokel-Walker, 2024). These images challenge Latour's notion of immutable mobiles, as their origins and authenticity are increasingly obscured.

When initiating conversations on AI as the co-family archivist, the authors' collective discussions revolved around the authenticity of narratives and the integrity of personal archives. With this comes the issue of how we are to identify authentic digital surrogates, when authenticity is something in question. The Digital surrogate is already a copy, and as Angelova (2025, p. 138) puts it, they are clones, ghosts of the original, lacking their own materiality. As we cope with this realization, we fear that AI use is quite prevalent in the archival profession, in the home, and in the classroom, and it is quickly pushing us away from truth and blurring the lines between reality and fallacy, thus compromising archival integrity and the preservation of cultural heritage as a whole.

As GenAI becomes embedded in everyday documentation, archival scholars must grapple with new questions of authenticity, agency, and preservation. We call for expanded frameworks that recognize AI as an unwanted archivist in documentation networks, while advocating for critical literacy around personal archives. AI disrupts notions of documents as immutable mobiles (disrupts archival fixity, stability, and unchangeability; Latour, 1986) and as stable evidence; (Reyes et al, 2024). AI-generated or AI-manipulated images lack clear provenance and can be endlessly altered. Ethical dilemmas of authenticity, bias, and ownership complicate AI-mediated archival practices (Hanna et al., 2024), leaving us with archival questions around provenance, original order, retention and disposal, and fixity. Are we on the right track for continual documentation? With the use of AI, can our documents remain in our control? The key is in our approach, and on the importance we place on maintaining and keeping our personal documentation practices.

## AI-enabled Discovery in the Family Archive

Generative AI, machine learning, and natural language processing can help family archivists discover new information by analyzing documents, photos, and digital DNA, and in helping connect the dots among disparate and seemingly unrelated documents. AI-powered text recognition tools can decipher and transcribe handwriting and make it easy for family-held letters, journals, wills, and vital statistics to become searchable. Some platforms such as FamilySearch.org use AI to search for millions of scanned documents and have become a very important tool with some genealogists. AI-driven facial recognition is helping individuals identify long-lost relatives in digitized family photo albums spanning generations and also making connections between previously unknown kin.

Facial recognition AI is a feature commonly found in our own mobile phones, especially if one uses cloud services like Google Photos to store one's photos. It tags our faces in our photos, and it automatically organizes them by 'faces'. On sites like MyHeritage.com it can even help you search by family member and connections across different images, with a related faces feature that compares faces in uploaded photos that may be a possible match across their database. Auto-tagging is another feature family archivists are using freely with just having their photos stored in Google Photos. This service uses AI to automatically tag and categorize images by faces, dates, and locations. In fact, this is something that is often automatically done in phones when a photo is taken as well, and it saves it to the phone's album, and often uploaded to cloud storage.

When it comes to constructing family narratives and connections, Generative AI is also being used to create narratives about ancestors by using information harvested from various sources of data from across the world. ChatGPT for instance will summarize records, and suggest ideas on how to write biographies, and entire family histories. Many are reliving family memories using video animation AI, where several honor their departed family member by using AI apps that will take still photos from videos and create video clips, turning still memories and even faded and burnt photos into vivid stories (kentbye,2024). These may seem useful to the family archivist, but one

important element to consider is the ethical issues that come as a tradeoff of using these technologies. The increasing use of AI in family genealogy raises important ethical considerations of data privacy and data ownership and the potential for misinterpretation of AI-generated results which require careful attention. How do we ensure fairness and accuracy in algorithmic matching, particularly when dealing with diverse populations and historical records that may contain inaccuracies and compromise the data sovereignty of cultural and Indigenous knowledges (Walker & Kukutai, 2018).

In addition, every personal document and every family history intersects with the documents of other people and other families. Although shared with us, those documents are not public, and we do not always have permission to access the documents accessible to AI. Hence, when using AI tools, it is important to maintain human oversight on the documents and be mindful of their custody. When automating digital recordkeeping using AI, one must consider the human aspect (Rolan et. al 2019), especially if we are to meet the challenges of recordkeeping in our fast-paced digital world. It is not all about just jumping on the AI bandwagon; working with AI tools in the archives requires outside resources, both technical knowledge and access to public budget funding for AI tools (Jaillant & Rees 2023). Knowing the policies is extremely important as AI use in the archives poses privacy concerns. Khuhro, et. al (2024) refers to privacy concerns when using AI in the archives as a balancing act that occurs between protecting a record's privacy and access risks, further entrenching known issues in both AI and archives. Archivists and individuals must be familiar with the policies that the organizations that provide AI services have, and knowing specifically what happens to one's data, one's photos, and one's family's stories. This is currently not the case; the average citizen does not understand what happens when they upload personal or sensitive family data, as the AI processing is currently not made transparent. All "personal digital archives are stories waiting for a narrator" (Zalinger, Freier, & Shneiderman, 2013, p. 133), but we cannot give over control of this narrative to AI alone.

## AI Use in the Archival Profession

Although we have reflected on the implications of AI on our personal and family archives so far, as information and archival professionals and educators, we also recognize that AI is being used in institutional archives, and the use of some of the AI-generated tools can indeed add value to curated archives. Yet, records remain exposed to issues of privacy and risk, and both matters remain critically undefined in the profession (Ingram & Johnson, 2024). Furthermore, there is a need for developing ethical and responsible AI practices in archives at the public level, in order to set the tone for combating ethical use of AI in the archives setting, and setting the tone for new policy and new applications that respect AI use in daily family documentation practice (Mannheimer, et al., 2024). We close here with some of the approaches to how AI is currently being used in archives. Archives are now exploring ways in which they can maximize their collection processing efforts. For example, by discovering approaches in which they can enhance metadata and use AI automation, specifically by using prompts to conduct descriptive work more rapidly.

AI is being used to automate certain tasks within archives, such as the detection of data classification and textual analysis to handle large volumes of archival records (Rolan, et. al 2019). This allows archivists to focus on higher-level tasks, such as the cultural, social, and historical context of collections. While AI can offer archivists benefits like efficiency, consistency, and the convenience of data analysis, there are several challenges to take into consideration. These challenges include data sensitivity, and the safety and security of keeping stories intact (Jaillant & Zhao 2025). Thus, human oversight is still a requirement in this process to avoid losing the meaning and integrity of collections (Rolan, et. al, 2019).

Unfortunately, this is the reality of using AI in the archival profession at present; it may inform appraisal processes and provide ease of automation for routine, mundane archival tasks but it also comes at a cost. There is a risk of errors and bias, which is evidently present within AI models and is reflected in the limited context it has to offer. This is yet another downside of AI technology, a fault in our own creation, where not having the appropriate who, what, when, and where is critical to authenticity and reliability of archival

collections. For these reasons, caution is needed when co-opting AI in family documentation practices.

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