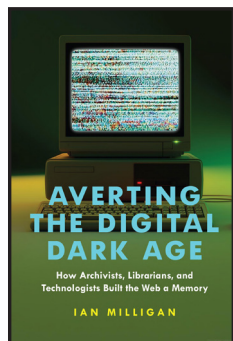


Averting the Digital Dark Age: How Archivists, Librarians, and Technologists Built the Web a Memory, Ian Milligan, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024. 208p. Hardcover, \$49.95. 9781421450148

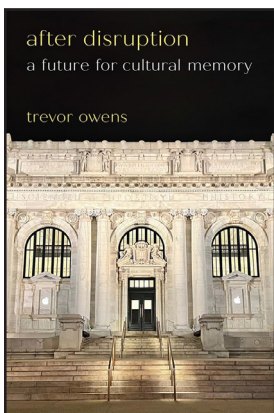


On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked the United States, an event that proved to be a watershed moment for the country. Much has been written and discussed about the impact of that day. Many of the smaller, more intimate details that we know about that event are still freely available on the internet due to the tireless efforts of various “memory institutions” that took action to preserve every moment possible, providing historians with a deeper insight into a singular event than had previously been thought possible. This was also confirmation of a five-year-long ongoing concern that information on the internet might be lost forever. Online data, once thought to be ephemeral, could in fact survive a great length of time with careful husbandry. *Averting the Digital Dark Age* presents a detailed analysis of the internet’s history, particularly in context of the challenges presented by attempts to preserve the huge amount of information contained on the web. By the dawn of the 1990’s, concerns began to rise as to how online information would be curated and preserved for posterity, and the concept of the “digital dark age” began to take hold in the minds of many librarians and archivists. The first major attempt to address this concern would become known as the Internet Archive, created in 1996. Taking a lesson from the Library of Alexandria’s ultimate destruction and the historical knowledge lost therein, the Internet Archive prioritized the broad distribution of its data as a safeguard against a repeat of such a calamity.

Milligan chose to focus on the earlier phase of data archiving and breaks down his argument into five chapters, roughly correlating with the five years between 1996 and 2001 where the identification of a very real potential threat of massive data loss gave way to several initial attempts to address the issue and finally peaking with the 9/11 crisis. The loss of data was averted, and multiple entities undertook the task of data preservation and archiving. This book does not seek to contribute new information to the field of media history, instead opting to clarify how previous works on the subject paint a picture of the daunting early years of digital media preservation. It examines how people and organizations around the world addressed the challenges of preservation. In the 1990’s, the internet was still a relatively small part of the greater world, but the intervening quarter of a century has since seen the internet take on a vastly greater role in society. The internet has arguably become the backbone of the social sphere in many nations and countries, thus the concept of preserving data has increased in importance. Throughout the text, the author uses previously established studies and publications to guide the reader through the fits and starts of the early, heady years of digital archiving to the successful implementation of various “memory institutions” that make the concept of the “digital dark age” largely a thing of the past (barring a major catastrophic event). Libraries and archives may have spearheaded the early attempts, but other entities outside of academia began to step up to tackle the problem, namely the Internet Archive and the Wayback Machine. Along with the referenced sources, Milligan creates a vivid historical text of one of

the greater challenges in recent history and, in a rather inspirational twist, reveals that it was the work of many different entities, both public and private, that made it possible to avoid a potential data vacuum in our social history. *Averting the Digital Dark Age* serves as a wealth of information for historians, particularly media scholars. It also provides a comprehensive look into one of the pressing issues of modern history and how a potential crisis was identified and avoided. Milligan states that the book is a study of historical scholarship, providing context for the role of media in the broader social world. Despite its subject matter, it doesn't concern itself too much with technology, but rather how technology, specifically the internet, affects society and its ability to harness its information, both past and present (11). As such, this volume would be an excellent addition to any academic library or archives that supports internet historians, providing fascinating insight into an otherwise overlooked era in media history. Should researchers wish to delve deeper into the subject matter, there is an excellent bibliography section as reference for further reading. —Dale E. Autry, *University of Southern Mississippi*

After Disruption: A Future for Cultural Memory, Trevor Owens, University of Michigan Press, 2024. 224p. Hardcover, \$80.00. 9780472076673



In *After Disruption: A Future for Cultural Memory*, Trevor Owens aims to dismantle the rhetoric of disruption and datafication that has permeated many aspects of our lives in the digital age by building towards a sustainable future outside of this problematic framework. The digital age has brought on what is widely known as a “period of disruption” — disruption being a keyword favored by tech moguls and Silicon Valley that characterizes rapid shifts in technology and digital media as well as its consequences on everything from the workforce to politics to our social lives (22). Memory work and cultural institutions have not been immune to this: the digital age has “played a role in changing how we collectively conceptualize memory itself” (1). Datafication has impacted how memory is processed, flattening and simplifying inherently dynamic and humanistic work. Owens demands that, as memory workers, we imagine a future beyond the rhetoric of disruption and invest in sustainable practices of care both in our professional work and workplace policies.

Owens argues that disruption has led to the devaluation of cultural memory institutions’ more meaningful work in favor of infinite growth metrics, forcing organizations to push their workers to “do more and more with less ... [instead of] focus on what work really needs to be prioritized” (106). Owens additionally frames memory institutions’ entrenched colonial practices in memory work within the ideological climate of the digital age; he calls for workers in the field to recognize how digitization can further entrench these problematic practices and to work towards a future that seeks to tap into previously underutilized diverse perspectives and enact justice. Our understanding of and ability to preserve our past depends on our ability to overcome this overreliance on metrics in favor of diverse frameworks of data measurement; meaningful, qualitative goals and initiatives; and building institutions of care, maintenance, and repair where we continually seek to understand the past more meaningfully.

Owens splits his argument into two parts: Part One, “Three Bankrupt Ideas,” traces the ideology of disruption from its conception in the 1990’s into the digital age, where its impact