Beyond Custodianship: Reimagining the Archivist's Role in the Information Industry

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing role of the archivist in the contemporary information industry, focusing on the extent to which archivists contribute to the creation, organization, preservation, management and utilization of information. It argues that the traditional perception of archivists as mere custodians of records is no longer sufficient in an environment shaped by digital technologies, artificial intelligence, electronic records and digital repositories. The paper highlights the emerging roles of archivists as digital information managers, records governance professionals, digital preservation specialists, research and information service providers, and contributors to institutional accountability and digital transformation. It further identifies challenges such as inadequate digital competencies, limited technological infrastructure, insufficient institutional support and ethical concerns. The paper recommends continuous professional development, greater involvement of archivists in digital transformation initiatives, stronger interdisciplinary collaboration and increased institutional recognition. It concludes that repositioning archivists beyond custodianship is essential for enhancing their visibility, relevance and strategic contribution to the information industry.

Keywords: Archivists, information industry, digital information, archival practice, artificial intelligence, digital preservation, information management.

Introduction

The information industry has undergone substantial transformation as a result of rapid developments in digital technologies, artificial intelligence (AI), automation, cloud computing, big data and networked information systems. Information is increasingly created, processed, stored and disseminated in electronic and born-digital forms, creating new demands for professionals responsible for its management and preservation. These developments have consequently expanded the information environment in which archivists operate, requiring them to engage with technologies and processes that extend beyond conventional archival practice. Alaoui (2024) observes that automation and AI are increasingly influencing the processes through which recorded information is created, processed, disseminated and preserved, thereby requiring archivists and records managers to reconsider their professional roles.

The archivist has traditionally been perceived primarily as a custodian of records responsible for acquiring, appraising, arranging, describing, preserving and providing access to records of enduring value. This custodial responsibility remains

fundamental to the preservation of institutional memory, historical evidence and cultural heritage. However, the growing volume and complexity of digital records have significantly broadened the professional environment of archivists. Digital and born-digital archives now require new approaches to preservation, description, accessibility and utilization, making it increasingly difficult to understand archival work solely in terms of the physical custody of records (Jaillant & Zhao, 2025).

The transformation of the information environment has also expanded the ways in which archivists contribute to information creation and management. Through activities such as digitization, metadata creation, archival description, indexing, digital collection development and the preparation of finding aids, archivists create additional information that enhances the discoverability, interpretation and usability of archival resources. The application of AI provides further opportunities for improving the processing and accessibility of large volumes of digital and born-digital records. Jaillant and Zhao (2025) note that AI can support the preservation, accessibility and usability of digital archives, while also creating new complexities relating to accuracy, bias, sensitivity and professional judgement.

Archivists are also increasingly becoming users of emerging technologies in the performance of their professional responsibilities. Recent evidence from Niu (2026) shows that practicing archivists are already using AI for diverse purposes, ranging from routine professional activities to tasks directly related to archival work. The study found that AI adoption can automate selected routine activities, improve efficiency, reduce backlogs, expand professional capacity and create new forms of archival activity. Rather than simply replacing archivists, therefore, AI is contributing to the reorganization of archival work and creating demand for new technical competencies.

The growing application of AI in archival practice further demonstrates that archivists are not merely passive custodians of information but active participants in its creation, organization, preservation, access and utilization. A systematic review by Shinde et al. (2024) identified the potential of AI-driven approaches to improve record-keeping processes and information retrieval while emphasizing the need for greater collaboration between archival science and artificial intelligence. Similarly, Alaoui (2024) argues that automation requires a reconsideration of archival processes and the roles of archivists and records managers. These developments suggest that the archivist's professional contribution increasingly extends across the wider information value chain.

Despite these expanding responsibilities, the archivist remains insufficiently recognized as an active stakeholder within the wider information industry. The continued association of archival work primarily with the storage and preservation of historical records can obscure the contemporary contributions of archivists to digital information management, information access, technological innovation and organizational knowledge. This limited perception is increasingly problematic because the value of archival collections now depends not only on their preservation but also on their discoverability, accessibility, interpretation and effective utilization in digital environments (Jaillant & Zhao, 2025; Niu, 2026).

This paper therefore argues that the changing information environment requires the archivist to be repositioned beyond custodianship and recognized as an active stakeholder in the information industry. The paper examines the evolving roles and contributions of archivists, particularly their involvement in information creation, organization, preservation, access and utilization. It further contends that recognizing these expanded responsibilities is essential for strengthening the professional visibility, relevance and strategic value of archivists in an increasingly digital, data-driven and technology-dependent information society.

The Archivist in the Traditional Information Landscape

The archivist is traditionally understood as a professional responsible for identifying, acquiring, appraising, organizing, preserving and providing access to records with enduring value. The profession is therefore fundamentally concerned with ensuring that records remain authentic, reliable and usable over time. In institutional settings, archivists manage records that document organizational activities, decisions, policies and experiences, thereby providing evidence that can be consulted by administrators, researchers and other users. Although this role has historically been associated with physical records, its underlying responsibility for maintaining reliable evidence and facilitating access remains relevant in contemporary information environments (Society of American Archivists [SAA], 2026). (Society of American Archivists)

Traditional archival functions include acquisition, appraisal, accessioning, arrangement, description, preservation and access. Through appraisal, archivists determine which records possess continuing administrative, legal, fiscal, historical or research value, while arrangement and description establish intellectual control and make collections understandable and retrievable. Archivists also create accession records, finding aids and descriptive information that assist users in locating and interpreting archival materials. These activities show that even within the traditional archival environment, archivists do more than physically store records; they actively organize and add contextual information that increases the usability and value of archival resources (SAA, 2026).

Archives also serve as important custodians of institutional memory by preserving evidence of the activities, decisions and experiences of organizations and communities. Institutional archives provide a continuing documentary connection between an organization's past and present, enabling users to understand how policies, structures and practices have developed over time. Recent scholarship further demonstrates that archives contribute to the construction of collective and institutional memory rather than simply functioning as passive repositories of historical documents. Rydén (2023) notes that archives play important roles in shaping historical narratives, identity, accountability and understandings of the past. The contribution of archivists extends to research, education, governance and cultural heritage. Researchers depend on archival collections for access to unique primary sources, while students and educators use archival materials to support teaching, learning and historical inquiry. Within organizations, archival records provide evidence for administrative decisions, institutional accountability and policy development. Archives also preserve documentary heritage that supports cultural identity and enables communities to maintain connections with their histories. In the African context, recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of archives in recovering, documenting and preserving diverse cultural memories that may otherwise remain poorly represented or at risk of loss (Blanke, 2024; Yu, 2024).

This traditional information landscape therefore demonstrates that the archivist has never been merely a passive keeper of records. Even before the emergence of digital technologies, archivists selected information for permanent preservation, organized it, created descriptive tools around it and facilitated its use by different categories of users. What has changed in the contemporary information industry is the scale, format, technology and complexity of these activities**.** The movement toward digital and born-digital information now provides an opportunity to build upon these traditional functions and reposition the archivist as a more visible participant in information creation, management, preservation and utilization.

The Transformation of the Information Industry

The information industry has shifted considerably from predominantly physical information environments to digital and

networked environments. Organizations now generate and manage increasing quantities of electronic documents, databases, websites, emails, multimedia files and other forms of digital information. For archivists, this transformation means that records may exist only in digital form and may be distributed across multiple technological platforms. Consequently, archival practice increasingly requires professionals to understand digital information systems, electronic records and the processes through which digital information can remain accessible and usable over time (Jaillant & Zhao, 2025; Canning & Jaillant, 2025).

The growth of electronic and born-digital records has particularly challenged traditional approaches to archival management. Unlike many physical records, digital records can be easily copied, modified, migrated or dispersed across different systems, making questions of authenticity, provenance, integrity and long-term preservation increasingly important. The expansion of cloud computing has further complicated this environment because organizational records may be stored across different cloud infrastructures and locations. Recent research therefore emphasizes the need for appropriate strategies and governance frameworks to ensure that electronic records remain trustworthy, secure and accessible throughout their lifecycle (Julaihi et al., 2024).

The transformation has also increased the importance of data management and information governance within archival practice. Archivists are increasingly required to understand how information is created, captured, classified, retained, preserved and made available for subsequent use. Their responsibilities consequently intersect with records management, data governance and organizational information systems. This development positions the archivist within a broader information management framework in which the professional contributes not only to preserving records but also to ensuring that information remains reliable, discoverable and usable for institutional and societal purposes (Canning & Jaillant, 2025; Jaillant & Zhao, 2025).

Artificial intelligence and automation are further reshaping archival practice by providing new possibilities for processing large volumes of records. AI can support activities such as transcription, classification, description, search and information retrieval, thereby reducing some routine workloads and improving access to large digital collections. Niu (2026) found that practicing archivists are already using AI in diverse ways, with the technology primarily reorganizing archival work rather than simply replacing archivists. Similarly, Shinde et al. (2024) identified AI as having significant potential to streamline record-keeping and improve information retrieval, while emphasizing the importance of collaboration between archival professionals and AI specialists.

These technological developments have important implications for traditional archival practice and professional identity. The archivist can no longer depend exclusively on conventional custodial skills but must increasingly develop competencies in digital preservation, data management, information systems, AI and emerging technologies. At the same time, technological adoption does not eliminate the need for professional judgement; rather, it creates new responsibilities relating to authenticity, ethics, privacy, bias, accountability and appropriate human oversight. The transformation of the information industry therefore presents an opportunity for archivists to move beyond traditional custodianship and assume a more active role in the creation, management, preservation, access and utilization of information (Alaoui, 2024; Sanbein, 2025).

Repositioning the Archivist as an Active Information Stakeholder

The transformation of the information environment provides a strong basis for repositioning the archivist from a traditional custodian of records to an active stakeholder in the information industry. Contemporary archival work increasingly extends across the information lifecycle, involving the creation, organization, preservation, accessibility and utilization of information. Alaoui (2024)

argues that the emergence of automation and artificial intelligence requires archivists and records managers to rethink their professional roles and participate more actively in the changing processes through which information is created, processed, disseminated and preserved.

As digital information managers, archivists increasingly contribute to the organization and accessibility of electronic and born-digital records. Their activities may include metadata creation, digital description, digitization, repository management and the development of systems that enable users to discover and utilize archival resources. The increasing volume of digital records means that archivists must understand not only the content of records but also the technological environments in which they are created, stored and accessed. This expanded responsibility places archivists within the broader information management process rather than at the final stage of records preservation.

Archivists also have an important role as records and information governance professionals**.** Organizations require reliable systems for determining what information should be created, retained, protected, accessed and preserved. Archivists can contribute their expertise in provenance, authenticity, retention, appraisal, access and accountability to these processes. Canning and Jaillant (2025) demonstrate the importance of combining information governance, risk management, human behaviour and technological approaches when dealing with large collections of digital records. Their work particularly emphasizes collaboration among records creators, archivists and information users in making digital records accessible and useful.

The archivist's role as a digital preservation specialist has also become increasingly important. Digital records can be affected by technological obsolescence, software and hardware changes, data loss and difficulties associated with maintaining authenticity and accessibility over time. Consequently, digital preservation requires continuous professional attention and appropriate technological strategies. Shinde et al. (2024) note that AI and other emerging technologies have considerable potential to improve archival and records-management processes, while emphasizing the need for collaboration between archival professionals and technology specialists.

Archivists further function as providers and facilitators of research and information services**.** Through archival description, metadata creation, digitization, indexing, finding aids and digital repositories, archivists add contextual information that enables users to discover, understand and utilize records. Their contribution therefore goes beyond keeping records safe; it includes transforming documentary resources into accessible information that can support research, teaching, policy development, institutional memory and public knowledge. The growing application of AI to archival collections also provides opportunities to improve search, discovery and access to large volumes of previously difficult-to-use digital records (Jaillant & Zhao, 2025).

Archivists also contribute to institutional accountability, transparency and decision-making by ensuring that reliable evidence of organizational activities is preserved and accessible when required. Records provide evidence of decisions, transactions, policies and institutional actions and can therefore support administrative decisions, audits, investigations and policy formulation. This makes archival expertise relevant to contemporary organizational governance. The National Archives' 2024 strategic framework similarly emphasizes the preservation, protection and sharing of records as part of supporting public inquiry and democratic participation while building digital capacity and responsibly embracing technological innovation.

The archivist can consequently be regarded as a strategic contributor to digital transformation. Participation in digitization projects, digital repositories, electronic records management, AI initiatives and information-governance programmes allows archivists to influence how information is created, organized, preserved and used within

organizations. Niu (2026) provides further evidence that practicing archivists are already engaging with AI in their professional activities, suggesting that emerging technologies are not simply changing archival tools but are also reshaping the nature of archival work. The future relevance of the profession therefore depends on the ability of archivists to combine traditional expertise in records and evidence with digital, technological and information-management competencies.

Challenges to the Repositioning of Archivists as Information Stakeholders

Despite the expanding responsibilities of archivists, several challenges may limit their effective participation in the contemporary information industry. One major challenge is the persistence of traditional perceptions of archival work, where archivists are often associated mainly with the custody and preservation of historical records. Such perceptions can reduce professional visibility and limit the involvement of archivists in organizational technology and information-management decisions. Recent evidence from South Africa, for example, identifies gaps in archivists' education and training, particularly in information and communication technologies, as an issue affecting the transformation and innovation of the profession (Collection and Curation, 2025).

Another major challenge is the digital skills and competency gap. The contemporary information environment requires archivists to understand electronic records, metadata, digital preservation, data management, artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. Niu (2026) found that archivists are already using AI in different aspects of their work, but the level and complexity of adoption vary. This suggests that professional development must move beyond traditional archival competencies and incorporate practical technological skills that enable archivists to participate confidently in digital information initiatives.

Inadequate technological infrastructure and institutional support may also restrict the ability of archivists to contribute effectively to digital information management. Digital preservation, repository development, automated description and AI-supported information discovery require reliable infrastructure, appropriate software, adequate storage capacity and technical support. Without these resources, archivists may remain dependent on conventional practices even when they recognize the potential of emerging technologies. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), for instance, is developing AI applications for automated classification, semantic search and natural-language interaction with archival records, demonstrating the level of technological infrastructure and institutional planning required to reposition archival services.

Ethical, privacy and governance concerns represent another important challenge. The use of AI in archival environments raises questions concerning data protection, bias, intellectual property, authenticity, transparency and the reliability of automated outputs. Jaillant and Zhao (2025) emphasize that AI applications in archives require engagement across the archival chain, including record creators, archivists and users. Similarly, current professional guidance stresses that AI should support archival work within appropriate documentation, metadata, access and governance frameworks rather than replace professional judgement.

Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate professional repositioning of the archivist**.** Archivists need continuous training in digital technologies, data management, AI, digital preservation and information governance, while archival institutions need stronger investment in infrastructure and opportunities for multidisciplinary collaboration. Professional bodies and educational institutions should also encourage research and innovation that connects archival practice with emerging information technologies. The Society of American Archivists' recent research agenda initiative, which brings together archivists and non-archivist stakeholders, illustrates the

importance of broad collaboration in strengthening the future direction of the profession.

The way forward is therefore not to abandon the traditional custodial identity of the archivist but to expand it. The knowledge of provenance, authenticity, appraisal, preservation and contextual interpretation remains valuable, but it must be combined with digital and technological competencies. By developing these capabilities and participating more actively in organizational information strategies, archivists can move from being viewed primarily as custodians of information to being recognized as creators, managers, preservers, facilitators and users of information. This repositioning is essential if archivists are to occupy a more visible and strategic place within the contemporary information industry.

Roles and Contributions of Archivists to the Information Industry

Archivists make important contributions to the information industry through the creation, organization, preservation, management and provision of access to information. Although their traditional identity has been associated with custodianship, contemporary archival practice increasingly involves active participation in digital information environments. Archivists help determine what information should be retained, how it should be organized and described, and how it can be made accessible to different categories of users. This makes them important stakeholders in ensuring that information remains authentic, meaningful and usable across time (Niu, 2026).

One important contribution of archivists is their role in creating and enhancing information**.** Archival creation does not necessarily mean producing the original records; rather, archivists create metadata, finding aids, descriptions, indexes, catalogues, digitized versions and contextual information that make existing records more intelligible and discoverable. Through these activities, archivists transform collections of records into structured information resources that can be searched and used for research, education, administration and decision-making. Emerging AI technologies are also creating new opportunities for archivists to support automated description, transcription and discovery while retaining professional oversight (Shinde et al., 2024).

Archivists also contribute through the utilization and dissemination of information. Archival collections have limited value when they remain inaccessible or difficult to understand. Archivists therefore facilitate the use of information by researchers, students, administrators, policymakers and members of the public through reference services, exhibitions, digital repositories, research support and online access platforms. The application of AI to archival collections is further expanding possibilities for information discovery and access, particularly where large volumes of digital records would otherwise be difficult to process manually (Jaillant & Zhao, 2025).

Another significant contribution is the archivist's role in information governance and accountability. Organizations depend on reliable records to demonstrate what decisions were made, how activities were conducted and how resources were managed. Through appraisal, retention, preservation and access, archivists help ensure that institutional information remains available as evidence when required. This role places archivists within organizational decision-making processes because reliable records can support policy development, audits, legal requirements, research and institutional planning. The professional responsibility therefore extends beyond preserving the past to supporting present organizational information needs.

The contemporary archivist is also increasingly involved in technological innovation and digital transformation. Archivists are participating in the adoption of AI, automation and other digital technologies to improve description, retrieval, preservation and access. Niu (2026) found that AI is already being used by practicing archivists for a range of activities and is primarily transforming how archival work is organized rather than eliminating the need for archivists.

This suggests that the future contribution of archivists will involve a combination of professional archival judgement and technological competence.

The extent to which archivists contribute to the information industry therefore depends increasingly on their willingness and capacity to move beyond passive custodianship. They are not merely receivers and preservers of information; they also create value-added information, facilitate information use, manage information resources, support evidence-based decisions and participate in technological innovation. Current professional guidance on AI similarly emphasizes that archivists should actively participate in shaping the responsible use of emerging technologies rather than simply responding to technological changes introduced by others (Colavizza & Jaillant, 2026).

Strategies for Strengthening the Archivist's Position in the Information Industry

Strengthening the position of archivists in the contemporary information industry requires a deliberate shift from a predominantly custodial orientation toward a broader information-management and technology-oriented role. Archivists need to participate actively in the processes through which information is created, organized, described, preserved, accessed and reused. This does not require abandoning traditional archival principles; rather, it involves extending professional expertise into emerging digital environments. Recent research indicates that technologies such as artificial intelligence are already transforming archival work by automating routine activities, expanding professional capacity and creating new forms of archival practice (Niu, 2026).

A major strategy is continuous professional development and digital skills acquisition**.** Archivists require competencies in electronic records management, metadata, data management, digital preservation, artificial intelligence and information systems. Professional education should therefore combine traditional archival knowledge with practical technological training. Ayinde et al. (2025) argue that the emergence of the Fifth Industrial Revolution requires information professionals, including archivists, to develop competencies in data analysis, information architecture, digital preservation and emerging technologies. Such competencies would enable archivists to participate more confidently in multidisciplinary information projects and demonstrate their relevance beyond conventional archival settings.

Another strategy involves greater participation in information and technology projects within organizations. Archivists should be involved from the planning stages of digitization projects, electronic records systems, digital repositories, data-governance initiatives and AI applications rather than being invited only after information systems have been established. Their expertise in provenance, authenticity, context, appraisal and preservation can contribute to the quality and reliability of these systems. Niu (2026) demonstrates that AI adoption can create opportunities for archivists to undertake new activities and reallocate professional time toward tasks that require human judgement and archival expertise.

Archivists should also strengthen their contribution to information creation and value addition**.** Through metadata, descriptive standards, finding aids, digitization, transcription and contextual documentation, archivists actively create information that makes records discoverable and meaningful. Archival description involves professional judgement and interpretation, meaning that archivists play an important role in determining how collections are represented to users (King, 2024). Emerging technologies can support these activities, but professional oversight remains essential to ensure that automated descriptions and metadata accurately represent archival materials and their contexts.

Collaboration and professional visibility are equally important. Archivists should work more closely with librarians, records managers, data scientists, ICT specialists, researchers and organizational administrators. Such collaboration can

position archival expertise within broader information strategies and demonstrate the practical contribution of archives to organizational objectives. The development of AI-based archival systems, for example, increasingly requires cooperation between archival professionals and technology specialists to ensure that technological solutions address genuine archival and user needs (Colavizza et al., 2021).

Finally, archival institutions and professional associations should advocate for greater institutional recognition, adequate funding and supportive policies. Without appropriate infrastructure, staffing, training and organizational support, the ability of archivists to participate meaningfully in the information industry will remain limited. Institutions should recognize archivists as strategic information professionals whose work contributes to evidence-based decision-making, institutional memory, accountability, research and digital transformation. Repositioning the archivist in this manner will make the profession more visible and demonstrate that archival expertise remains essential in an information industry increasingly shaped by data, digital technologies and artificial intelligence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The changing nature of the information industry has fundamentally expanded the scope of archival practice. The archivist is no longer limited to the preservation and custody of historical records but increasingly participates in digital information management, records governance, digital preservation, information access, research support and technological innovation. The emergence of artificial intelligence, automation and other digital technologies further demonstrates that archival expertise remains relevant, although the nature of professional work is changing. The discussion in this paper establishes that archivists contribute to the information industry not only by preserving information but also by creating value-added information, organizing information, facilitating its utilization, supporting institutional accountability and participating in digital transformation**.** Through metadata, description, digitization, repositories, information governance and research services, archivists make information more discoverable, reliable and usable. The increasing application of AI to archival activities further demonstrates the potential for archivists to participate in new forms of information creation and access while retaining professional judgement and responsibility The paper therefore argues that repositioning the archivist requires a deliberate combination of traditional archival expertise and contemporary digital competencies. Archivists should acquire practical skills in AI, data management, digital preservation, metadata, information governance and emerging technologies. At the institutional level, archives should be provided with adequate technological infrastructure, funding and opportunities for collaboration with ICT specialists, librarians, records managers, researchers and organizational decision-makers. Recent professional guidance similarly emphasizes that AI should support archival work within appropriate preparation, documentation, governance and ethical frameworks.)

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing discussion, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the professional position of archivists and enhance their contributions to the contemporary information industry:

1. Archival institutions should strengthen digital competencies through continuous professional development in artificial intelligence, data management, digital preservation, metadata and emerging information technologies.
2. Archivists should be actively involved in organizational information and technology projects, particularly digitization, electronic records management, digital repositories, data governance and AI implementation.
3. Professional associations and library and information science schools should update archival education and training to integrate digital technologies, AI, data

literacy and information governance alongside traditional archival principles.

4. Organizations should recognize archivists as strategic information professionals and include them in institutional decision-making concerning information creation, management, preservation, access and utilization.

5. Archival institutions should establish ethical and governance frameworks for AI use, ensuring that automation does not compromise authenticity, provenance, privacy, accountability and professional judgement.

6. Greater collaboration should be encouraged between archivists and other information and technology professionals so that archival knowledge can contribute more effectively to digital transformation and the broader information industry.

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