CHAPTER ONE

The Source: The Basis of Our Knowledge about the Past

A. What Is a Source?

Sources are artifacts that have been left by the past. They exist either as relics, what we might call "remains," or as the testimonies of witnesses to the past.

The first kinds of sources, relics or remains, offer the researcher a clue about the past simply by virtue of their existence. The wooden columns found at the site of a prehistoric settlement testify, for example, to the existence of a people and tell historians something about their culture. The pegs or dowels they used to fasten building materials further enlighten scholars about their technical skills and artistic capacities. By comparing their artifacts with those from other places, historians can further learn something of their commercial or intellectual relations (for example, by comparing frescos from the Cycladen island of Santorini with those from Crete).

In contrast, testimonies are the oral or written reports that describe an event, whether simple or complex, such as the record of a property exchange (for example, the donation of land to a medieval monastery or the sale of shares on the New York Stock Exchange). Speeches or commentaries are also testimonies. Vaclav Havel's speech during the "Velvet Revolution" in Prague in 1989 is one such example; in it, he fulminated against the communist hard-liners and reformers and claimed the "Prague Spring" of 1968 as historical precedent for his own revolution. The authors of such testimonies can provide the historian information about *what* happened, *how* and in what circumstances the event occurred, and *why* it occurred. Nevertheless, few sources yield this information in

equal measure, and it is the historian's job to supplement the raw material available in the source itself.

Both relics and testimonies were usually created for the specific purposes of the age in which they were made. What are called relics were, typically, objects of practical use in daily life and only later, in the ages that followed, came to be treated as historical sources. The same is true of most testimonies, whether oral or written. They were composed to provide contemporaries proof of an act or of a right, or in order to inform them about a fact. Only rarely were they designed for the use of posterity, although that sometimes occurred. In contrast to a relic, the content of a testimony is thus usually more important than its form. Still, the form of such a report often tells the alert historian a great deal; to this point we will later return. It is perhaps unnecessary to point out that one of the historian's principal tasks is to uncover the original purpose or function of the relics or testimonies that have come down to posterity, to divine what use they were intended to serve and what purposes they actually served at the time they were created.

Testimonies and artifacts, whether oral or written, may have been intentionally created, perhaps to serve as records, or they might have been created for some other purpose entirely. Scholars sometimes think of the first as having had an "intention," the second as being "unintentional." In fact, however, the distinction is not as clear at it may at first seem, for a source designed for one purpose may come to have very different uses for historians. For example, a film taken to record one event but which inadvertently captured another might well be "unintentional" in conception, as was the film of President John F. Kennedy's assassination taken by a bystander who meant only to record the parade for his private enjoyment. That film's role in history and in historical interpretation has, however, been profoundly more important. A memoir written to explain a life, a legal brief designed to prove a case in court, and a portrait commissioned by a noblewoman obviously are not innocent of design and motive, for they were produced with specific purposes in mind. To distinguish an "intentional" source from an "unintentional" is not to argue that one is more transparent, more reliable than another. Unintentional sources are unintentional only in the sense that they were not produced with the historian's questions in mind; they are not, however, otherwise "innocent." Conversely, intentional sources contain features not under the control of their authors and have lives beyond their original intentions. A memoir intended to justify the choices its author made during her life may, in fact, inadvertently reveal the uncertainties and untruths that she sought to conceal. It may, moreover, have been received in totally unexpected

ways, therefore affecting the future in ways the author would never have intended.

Historians must thus always consider the conditions under which a source was produced—the intentions that motivated it—but they must not assume that such knowledge tells them all they need to know about its "reliability." They must also consider the historical context in which it was produced—the events that preceded it, and those that followed, for the significance of any event recorded depends as much on what comes after as it does on what comes before. Had the Boston Tea Party of 1773 not been followed by the American Revolution, it would have had considerably less significance than historians have since given it, and the very same newspaper report of the uprising, in the very same archive, would have had a very different status from the one it actually acquired. Thus, historians are never in a position—and should never imagine themselves as being in a position—to read a source without attention to both the historical and the historiographical contexts that give it meaning. This, of course, is the heart of historical interpretation.

Sources are thus those materials from which historians construct meanings. Put another way, a source is an object from the past or testimony concerning the past on which historians depend in order to create their own depiction of that past. A historical work or interpretation is thus the result of this depiction. The relationship between the two can be illustrated by an example: The diary left by a midwife who lived in colonial New England constitutes a source. On the basis of such a source, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich created a prize-winning historical study, *A Midwife's Tale* (1990). A source provides us evidence about the existence of an event; a historical interpretation is an argument about the event.

Although when we use the term "source" we have in mind these primary sources, such sources can themselves be direct or indirect. A direct source might be the letters or chronicles that come to us from eighteenth-century businessmen, a law code written in 846, or a poem penned just yesterday. An indirect source might be an eighteenth-century inventory listing the letters and books found in an educated woman's study, from which scholars could deduce something about the kind of training she had received and her intellectual interests; or, to pursue the examples given here, it might be an eleventh-century register cataloging the contents of a princely archive that named the ninth-century code; or it could be a computer printout of sales of poetry volumes from the Barnes and Noble at Broadway and 82nd in Manhattan.

The boundaries between a source (whether direct or indirect) and a

historical study are not always, however, so clear. Although an ancient weapon—a spear or a catapult, for instance—or a deed transferring ownership of a piece of land is, obviously, a source in the usual sense, certain documents have an ambiguous and shifting status. Herodotus and Thucydides, for example, each of whom provided accounts of events in their own days, can be considered both historians of their ages—creators of historical interpretations—and authors of sources in that they provide modern-day historians evidence both about these events and about the intellectual culture of the ages in which they wrote. In many cases, moreover, the sources that former historians used to compile their own accounts are lost to the present, so the historical interpretation they constructed serves present-day historians also as a "source of sources," their only route to lost evidence. The church history left by Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 265—340 C.E.), for example, mentions countless texts that are now lost; his work thus serves not only as a historical interpretation concerning the first Christian centuries, but also as an indirect source about this era.

It is thus one of the primary responsibilities of the historian to distinguish carefully for readers between information that comes literally out of the source itself (in footnotes or by some other means) and that which is a personal interpretation of the material. For the literal content of a citation—what is transcribed from the source itself—historians have no ethical responsibility; for the meaning they impart to that material, of course, they are entirely responsible.

B. Source Typologies, Their Evolution and Complementarity

Written sources are usually categorized according to a tripartite scheme: as narrative or "literary," as diplomatic/juridical, or as social documents. Although these categories are arbitrary and, as we shall see, can distort as much as clarify the status of the evidence a particular source can provide, it is important to recognize that sources do, in fact, have generic qualities. One kind of source can not be read exactly like another, and each should be analyzed in terms of its formal properties as well as in terms of content.

Sources traditionally classified as *narrative or literary* include chronicles or tracts presented in narrative form, written in order to impart a particular message. The motives for their composition vary widely. A scientific tract is typically composed in order to inform contemporaries or succeeding generations; a newspaper article might be intended to shape opinion; the so-called ego document or personal narrative such as a diary or mem-

oir might be composed in order to persuade readers of the justice of the author's actions; a novel or film might be made to entertain, to deliver a moral teaching, or to further a religious cause; a biography might be written in praise of the subject's worth and achievements (a panegyric or hagiography). Such sources thus take many different forms, which are highly dependent upon the conventions of the age in which they were written. The category of "narrative source" is therefore considerably broader than what we usually consider "fiction." Novels and poetry—the archtypical fictions—are, nevertheless, a subset of this category, a kind of source, although they were not composed with the purpose of informing successors about the time in which they were written.

Questions of intentionality, discussed above, become especially important in the case of "ego documents." Diaries, for example, can almost never treated as reliable reports about an event, but must be read in terms of the very individual perspective from which they were written, as an index of what the author (that is, the "intellectual author," a term we will define later) considers his truth.[1] Memoirs are similarly selective accounts, always highly edited versions of the life being recorded, almost always highly teleological in structure (in that they are written to explain the outcome of a life, not to record its process). In general, then, ego documents record the author's perception of events, perhaps even his memory of how he experienced them, and they can often tell us a great deal about the writer's political intentions and his tactics, as well as his ideology and the culture of the age.

Diplomatic sources are understood to be those which document an existing legal situation or create a new one, and it is these kinds of sources that professional historians once treated as the purest, the "best" source. The classic diplomatic source is the charter, a "legal instrument," what Germans call the *Urkunde,* the French the *charte* or *diplôme.* This is a document, usually sealed or authenticated in some other way, intended to provide evidence of the completion of a legal transaction or proof of the existence of juristic fact and which could serve as evidence in a judicial proceeding in the event of dispute. Scholars differentiate those legal instruments issued by public authorities (such as kings or popes, the New York Court of Appeals or the U.S. Congress) from those involving only private parties (such as a will or a mortgage agreement).

The form of any particular legal instrument is fixed. It possesses specific formal properties (external, such as the hand or print style, the ink,

1. "Truth" is, to be sure, a slippery notion for the individual recounting an event. See, for further discussion, Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1982).

the seal; internal, such as particular rhetorical devices and images) which are determined by the norms of law and by tradition. Such characteristics thus vary in time (each generation has its own norms) and according to provenance (each bureaucracy has its own traditions—the emperor's has one style, the pope's another, the United States House of Representatives' still another).

Technically, a diplomatic source is composed of three parts. The first is the "protocol," which is generally quite stereotypical; it includes the names of the author or issuer and of the recipient, a standard opening or salutation, and an appeal to some higher authority that legitimates the legal act—perhaps a god ("in the name of the Father . . ."), a secular lord ("by the power invested in me . . ."), or a principle of justice ("we hold these truths to be self-evident . . ."). The second is the content itself, the recitation of the case and its determination. Here the form is variable, being determined largely by the purpose of the document. The third is the closing (the *eschatocol*); again, the form is stereotypical, containing various authenticating formulas, witnesses, dates, and so on.

These charters can also be categorized according to function. Some are law-giving (ordinances, declarations of law, statutes, etc.). Others are juridical (judgments of courts and of other legal authorities); still others record voluntary agreements between individuals authenticated by public notaries, by officials of bishops, or by aldermen of cities. They deal with contracts, wills, marriage licenses, and all other forms of social agreements.

What historians often refer to as *social documents* are the products of record-keeping by bureaucracies such as state ministries, charitable organizations, foundations, churches, and schools. Containing information of economic, social, political, or judicial import, these documents provide accounts of particular charges or agencies (ambassadors' reports, municipal accounts, the findings of a particular commission), of meetings (parliamentary debates), of business policy. Or they give a survey of an administrative structure (the property registers of a monastery), of a fiscal structure (tax rolls), of a social structure (registers of births, marriages, and deaths, lists of citizenship registrations), or of a political administration (lists of rulers, cabinet officers, legislators).

Written sources of these kinds, although certainly essential to most historians' work and although sometimes imagined to be the exclusive suppliers of historical data, are by no means the only kind of historical source. Unwritten sources, both material and oral, are as essential elements of the historian's arsenal. Like written sources, they are of different types, or genres.

Archaeological evidence, whether articles from daily life, artistic creations such as jewelry or vases, dwellings, graves, roads, churches, or fortifications, counts as one of the most important categories of unwritten evidence. Such artifacts can tell historians a great deal about the culture of the area, the ways of life, the artistic ambitions of the people who lived there. If the objects unearthed in one place can be identified as having been made in another, they can also reveal a great deal about the commercial and sociocultural interconnections of the age.

Sometimes the archaeological object is little more than the trace of a former settlement, a scar left on a landscape. Even relics as apparently insignificant as the charred beams of a burned house, especially if they have been left untouched through time, can provide the historian valuable information. Archaeological sites of interest to historians are sometimes buried under present-day structures and first unearthed during excavations undertaken in the course of building a modern construction such as a subway or sewer line. For example, in 1993, Native American burial grounds were discovered in New York City during excavations for new subway construction.

Coin hoards, and sometimes hoards of paper currencies, have similarly provided historians with valuable information about the institutions of government, about economic conditions, about trade relations, about fiscal policy. In addition, historians rely heavily on visual representations, whether handmade or hand-finished, such as paintings, etchings, and drawings, or machine-produced, such as films and photographs.

Oral evidence is also an important source for historians. Much comes from the very distant past, in the form of tales and the sagas of ancient peoples, or from the premodern period of Western history in the form of folk songs or popular rituals. Such evidence also comes, however, from our own day, in the form, for example, of protest songs or other kinds of artistic performances. The interview is another of the major forms of oral evidence produced in our age. In their original form, all these sources were purely oral (or visual), and few were recorded in permanent ways. Hence, they are lost to scholars today. But some were preserved in one way or another, and it is thanks to those preservations, often accidental, that historians can still have access to them. In the present age of film and radio, a great many oral or otherwise ephemeral sources have thus been rendered "written," so that in some ways historians are today even more likely to use "oral" sources.

The degree to which any historian uses oral or material evidence depends, to a large extent, on the period being studied or on the particular subject under investigation. Historians' knowledge about prehistoric times—that is, the age before written records—is necessarily based entirely on the material or, indirectly, on the oral record. Beginning about

3000 B.C.E., writing was invented in Mesopotamia, thus inaugurating the "historical" age in human history. Thereafter, Greeks and Romans developed writing to an art, to a highly sophisticated form of communication, and it is for that reason that scholars have so much deeper and more nuanced knowledge of these ancient societies than of others. This is also the explanation for the profound influence these cultures have had on our own. During the early Middle Ages, however, oral communication became relatively more important, and it was only around the twelfth century that written communication achieved dominance even in elite circles in medieval Europe. With the invention of the printing press at the end of the fifteenth century, western European history came to be based principally on written sources. The press permitted exact reproduction, in quantity, of documents of all kinds—news reports, statutes, letters, fictions, poetry, drawings—thus assuring their long survival and wide circulation. The introduction of writing and printing had an enormous influence on intellectual history as well, for they gave scholars more extensive and more accurate access to the thoughts of their predecessors.

Nevertheless, historians do not rely entirely on written sources for their knowledge even of those ages in which the printed text existed. Moreover, the boundaries between written and oral, or for that matter between verbal and material, are arbitrary. Although historians have traditionally categorized material and oral sources apart from written, thereby calling attention to the generic differences among them and the dangers of treating them the same, skilled researchers know not to assume the differences, but to consider them critically. Today most scholars are use a mixture of oral, written, and other material sources as the situation requires.

What scholars know, for example, about the people of the "Ancien Régime" (the term used in much of France and western Europe to refer to the period from the late Middle Ages to about 1800)—about their actions, ideas, beliefs, and fantasies—comes to them through a wide variety of sources, some originally written, some written only after the fact, some never written. Folk songs, monuments, stories and tales, miniatures, drawings and other visual representations (vanity alone saw to it that we have countless portraits from the age) take their places alongside newspapers and diplomatic documents to provide the material on which historians have based extraordinarily rich accounts.

Technical innovations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have yielded new kinds of sources that continue to blur the boundaries between written, oral, and "material." To a certain extent, such innovation involved simply an improvement in quality: the photograph and, above all, the film provide representations that are in some ways more realistic

than the painted or drawn image. The years between 1802, when Thomas Wedgwood invented the photogramm on silver nitrate paper, and 1888, when Kodak introduced the film roll, were the decisive decades in the history of the still photograph. The period between 1832, when Joseph Plateau began experiments with moving film, and 1893, when Thomas Edison perfected techniques, was the crucial age for the development of technology for moving pictures. It was only around 1950, however, that the technology became available to preserve films adequately, and it is still more recently that efforts have been made to copy and thus preserve films made before that period. Until 1900, most films were what we call "documentaries," reports of current events or of natural phenomena. Dramatic films were made after that date, although it was not until after 1927 that we had "talkies."

Sound recordings date from the late nineteenth century, at least from Thomas Edison's creation of 1877. The gramophone recording followed, and since the 1980s we have had the compact disk. The collection of oral information on a grand scale began, however, with the tape recording, first made (out of metal) in 1931, and around 1940 produced synthetically.

The radio began in 1896 and was publicly available after 1902; regular transmission began in the United States after 1920. Television saw the first experiments in 1927; in 1936 it was made publicly available in London, in 1941 in New York. Ten years later it came to most of the European countries. This medium did not, however, constitute a true source, at least not in its early years, for the transmissions via television were mostly live, and were rarely recorded or saved. In contrast, tape or celluloid film recording events had a much greater chance of being saved, but it was only between about 1940 and 1970 that these media were widely used. These tapes do not, however, constitute a secure source. Typically, they have not lasted, and as they have deteriorated, information has been lost. Even the saved information is sometimes inaccessible. The French TV system, to cite just one example, has over 500,000 documentaries on tape—but has no way to make them easily accessible to researchers. Television's potential as a historical source has, then, some distance to go.

Similar problems beset the computer files on which a huge quantity of recent decades' social documents are stored. Many are at risk of erasure or inaccessibility; an even greater problem is posed by the rapid changes in hardware and software, for a record made today may be unreadable with the technology of tomorrow. In 1983, for example, it was discovered that a huge portion of the fiscal records kept by the United States government were inaccessible, because the Japanese company which had supplied the original technology for reading these records was no longer

making it. The problem here is not so much technical as organizational; what is needed is a political and financial commitment to maintaining the accessibility of these materials.

All these sources, although different from one another, are in many ways complementary. Oral records obviously can complement the written, a realization that was for too long lost on most professional historians. One of the first to recognize the relation of oral traditions to written texts was Jan Vansina, a Flemish historian who is now teaching in the United States.[2] A student of West African culture, he established that the stories handed down from one generation to another in that culture were as stable and reliable accounts of their past as were the written chronicles and personal narratives that have survived from the western European past, that in fact they were of the same genre.

Vansina's argument was, in essence, methodological, for he was not saying that all oral accounts achieve this level of reliability; they do so only if they meet several tests. Vansina's tests concerned both matters external to the text (is the narrator [or witness] a member of the group that controls the transmission of the narrative? does the narrative come to the researcher via a social institution or via a closed caste?) and those internal (is the narrative stylistically coherent, that is, does the witness's or reporter's tale conform to the linguistic, stylistic, ritualistic, and juridical norms of the period and the place from which his tale is told [or pretends to originate]?). Vansina's contribution to historical methodology was significant, for historians had by and large not understood that in many societies (including Europe of the tenth and eleventh centuries), social relations were sustained through oral acts, and that the most important legal transactions achieved their authenticity by means of oral witnessing and the like. Oral communication thus rarely indicates arbitrary action and social anarchy; it can, in fact, be the mark of a complex and well-ordered sociopolitical system.

Still, historians can place trust in oral sources only to the extent that they can be verified by means of external evidence of another kind, such as archaeological, linguistic, or cultural. In one case, for example, researchers studying travelers' reports from sixteenth-century Africa were able to make sense of attitudes and practices described in those reports by comparing them to similar behaviors characteristic of modern, better-understood cultures and by analysis of the archaeological record. Thus, in this case historians were able to use the present to understand the past. It would, however, be a mistake to conclude from this instance that such

2. J. Vansina, *De la tradition orale. Essai de méthode historique* (Tervuren, 1961); in English as *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wis., 1985).

comparisons will always be fruitful. Human cultures do not remain unchanged over time. Even before the period of colonial rule in Africa, we know, sociocultural upheavals of enormous importance took place on that continent; thus, neither there nor anywhere else dare we assume that the social codes and cultural patterns are in any sense "eternal." Indeed, the anthropologist's impulse, to look for basic—and somehow unchanging—patterns, should be complemented by the historian's bias—to expect and look for change.

It is not only premodern cultures that produce oral sources of use to the historians. All cultures do so, and in certain instances oral reports can provide critically important evidence. In times of social upheaval (during wars, revolts, and strikes, for example), witnesses are not inclined to write down their experiences—resisters have to fear their occupiers, strikers their bosses and the law. For that reason, interviews can sometimes substitute for the personal account that cannot be written. Al Santoli's oral history of the Vietnam War provides one revealing example of the value of such techniques. Santoli interviewed thirty-three veterans of the conflict who reported events that never made it into the official documents constituting the military archives. The men interviewed told of their initial optimism and bravado and then how the realities of combat—the body bags, carnage on the battlefield, terror, shock, and loss—destroyed morale and humanity among them.[3]

Interviewing—or the kind of interviewing that can serve the careful historian—is, however, no simple art. The questions asked must be carefully designed, in accordance with an overall plan about the kind of information sought and about the tests of reliability to which it will be subjected; at the same time, however, the interviewer must be flexible, able to shift the terms of the interview to pursue unexpected avenues and avoid dead ends. In general, "hard" interviews can be distinguished from "soft." In the first—the kind of real value to historians—the interviewer has worked hard to reconstruct the historical situation in which the informant lived in order to get beyond the simple narrative about what did or did not happen. A good interview is one in which the story becomes richer, more nuanced, more understandable in the telling, not one in which guilt or innocence is proved, a cause is vindicated, a person found out. Thus, even an interview constructed as though it were a "fact-finding" expedition is something much more; it is in itself an interpretation, a source that must be analyzed with extreme care.

3. Al Santoli, *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-three American Soldiers Who Fought It* (New York, 1981); see also Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of Men and Women Who Fought It* (New York, 1981).

C. The Impact of Communication and Information Technology on the Production of Sources

Although historians make choices among the materials left by the past, treating one object or text as a source and rejecting another or relegating it to secondary status in the hierarchy of evidence, they must choose from what is available. Only certain kinds of potential evidence was produced in any given age, only some of that was preserved, and only a portion of that is accessible to any given historian. If they are to make wise choices among potential sources, historians must thus consider the ways a given source was created, why and how it was preserved, and why it has been stored in an archive, museum, library, or any such research site.

The availability of sources is, in general, very much determined by technology, that is by the conditions under which a given culture received and collected information. The mechanisms of communication and the speed at which information circulated are both elements of this technological history of sources. This history can be divided into three periods.

In the first, information was transmitted by people who walked or ran with the news, at a rate probably never exceeding six miles per hour. The medium of transmission was thus the messenger himself. Sometimes messages were also sent by visual signal (flags) or by sound (drums), and thus news traveled faster, but in none of these cases could a complex message be delivered with great precision, and in all of them geographic or climatic conditions could radically limit the range and speed of transmission. Today, such methods are of course rarely used, but some conventions have survived—the custom, for example, of flying flags at half mast to mark a death or the practice of ringing sirens to sound an alarm.

In the second phase, information was transported using pack animals. This phase began about 2000 B.C.E. in central Asia, about 1000 B.C.E. in the Mediterranean area, and sometime during the sixteenth century among the Incas in Peru, and is still used in some parts of South America and Africa. Average speeds using this form of transportation were at least double, often triple, those in areas where information was carried by people.

Other technical developments further improved this mode of transmission. By 3000 B.C.E., Mesopotamians were using clay tablets to record information; around 1000 B.C.E. the Phoenicians developed an alphabet, which made writing much more efficient. Persian kings created the courier system of transport, in which messages were handcarried by specially designated agents, a method later used both in Byzantium and in Rome. By the thirteenth century an elaborate system for delivering the

mail had been worked out to connect the Florentine banking and merchant houses to the trade fairs in Champagne (France); the system was adopted by the pope in the following century. By the end of the fifteenth century Europe had a net of postal connections that had been developed by the Milanese firm of Thurn and Taxis; in 1505 the firm was granted a monopoly for the Spanish post.

In 1436, a trip between London and Venice took 23 to 51 days, and in 1442, a journey from Genoa to Bruges lasted 22 to 25 days. Thus, distance traveled daily averaged 30 to about 50 miles. Between the fifteenth and the nineteenth century, this rate of travel was to double, thanks to the long-distance routes that were constructed during this period.

Three categories of information were transported in this period, each of which required a slightly different technology of literacy. The first included secret correspondence ("litterae clausae") of various kinds (economic or business, diplomatic, military) which had to be written in code. The second was general correspondence ("litterae patentes") which, in time, was taken over by the newspaper, the third category. The forerunners in the production of this genre were the Venetians, who regularly penned commentaries (called *avvisi*) to accompany the business correspondence they sent all over Europe; they were followed by the German trade cities like Nuremberg and Wittenberg, which produced what they still call *Zeitungen* (newspapers). True, printed newspapers with a regular periodicity appeared first in Strasbourg (1609) and Antwerp (1629). It was only later that a distinction was made between simple newssheets (which had no explicit editorial content) and "newspapers of opinion."

The third phase of communication is, of course, defined by mechanical media. In 1830, the train increased the speed at which information could be transmitted to 30 to 35 miles per hour. With the invention of the telegraph in 1844, information transmission became almost instantaneous. By 1896 it required only seven minutes to transmit a message from one place on the globe to another. The more recent innovations such as telephone, fax, radio, television, and satellite have made information transmission truly instantaneous and practically universal. Accompanying this technological revolution were organizational changes in the way information was gathered and delivered. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of huge wire services such as Reuters and U.P.I, which provide news services to thousands of small clients; most newspapers rely entirely on these services for information from beyond their own locality and thus have no independent sources by which they can verify the data they receive.

It is evident that the speed at which a piece of information can be trans-

mitted, along with its ubiquitousness, directly affects its influence. Today's media (CNN, for example) make the world a "global village," and that is in some sense a cheerful thought, for it means that people today increasingly have access to exactly the same information at the same time and often react similarly. But it also means that an incident such as the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 elicits an immediate reaction, in Moscow and Washington alike, with all the risks that such speed entails.[4] Still, there are real advantages to the speed of communication possible today. Consider, for example, that when the harvest failed in fifteenth-century England or the Low Countries, it took two months before grain could be purchased in the Baltic area and another two months before it arrived where needed—far too late for a huge portion of the population.

The power of modern-day communications, with their steady stream of fashion changes and technical innovations, depends, however, not just on the speed at which messages travel but also on the quality of the carrier and of the distribution system. It also depends on the readiness of the audience to accept the innovation. It is, for example, no accident that the first mechanical clocks were developed in Italy in the fourteenth century and were first imitated and distributed in Flanders and England, where Italy had good commercial relations and where the commercial infrastructure and socioeconomic system were similar.

The material qualities of the message itself affect its influence as well. When, in the human past, messages were first written and then printed, their survivability and distribution potential increased enormously, but with the advent of radio and TV, messages have in some ways become more ephemeral. In general, one can say that the quality and accuracy of messages increased when letters and manuscripts replaced oral transmissions and then, later, printed materials replaced handwritten. Marshall McLuhan has famously argued, in fact, that the "medium is the message," that the form in which information comes is often more significant than the message itself. The centuries-long domination of the written word implicitly privileged—and developed capacities for—abstract thinking; TV and film, in contrast, emphasize the visual, the concrete.

Mass communications can also create collective memories. By this, we mean that when information about an event, or series of events, is broadcast widely and simultaneously, the event becomes part of a shared experience, part of historical memory. The Vietnam War in the late sixties and early seventies provides a perfect example: the daily news reports about

4. See, on the Cuban missile crisis, E. R. May and P. D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

the war created for a great many Americans, especially young Americans, a single experience, an experience that galvanized political resistance to the war. The lesson, it should be noted, was not lost on the American military. Media coverage of the Gulf War (1990–91) was much more restricted, and if a collective memory survives of that war, it will surely be of the way it was covered rather than the conflict itself. The Velvet Revolution in Prague, the fall of the Berlin Wall and Tiananmen Square, all in 1989, similarly joined the West's collective memory, largely as a result of the mass media.

Mass media and the technology that makes it possible have thus utterly changed the character of news reporting and its relationship to scholarship. Very early in the history of the press, however, even in the days of the sixteenth-century *avvisi* written strictly for Italian businessmen, the mass potential of the press was recognized, and with that development came political control. Even then, governments sought to limit the press's potentially subversive character by requiring that such newspapers obtain official licenses to publish. In the nineteenth century, western European governments often imposed onerous taxes on newspapers, a practice which restricted their ability to collect, publish, and circulate news; it was only under the pressure of public opinion that such taxes were abolished, in Belgium in 1848, for example, England in 1855, and France in 1881.

Today, most newspapers in the West depend for their financial support on governments (the former Soviet Union's *Pravda*, for example), private interest groups (*L'Osservatore Romano*) or private firms (*Stampa*, in Italy, is owned by Fiat). Thus, most are subject to political and ideological pressures of various kinds. Sometimes it is subtle, delivered implicitly; sometimes it is more direct. Dictatorial regimes have gone even further, often even prescribing what is to be published. An early highpoint (or lowpoint) in government control of the press was reached by Hitler's minister for propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, with his Ministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda. The historical consequences of this ominous move are well known.

In contrast, some presses are relatively "free," in that they function independently of political affiliation or other direct control. The London *Times* was for years the archetypal newspaper of this genre; on the continent, France's *Le Monde* and Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* represent the tradition. In the United States, a handful of nationally circulated newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* provide critical coverage of politics and are powerfully able to mobilize public opinion. The rapid technological developments of recent years—those making CNN or the Internet possible, for example—are often

considered part of this tradition of press "freedom." Although the growth of these media is driven by commercial motives, it is frequently argued that they provide such easy access, both for the public and for newsmakers, that they help preserve the "freedom of the press."

The press, then, including the nonprint press, is considerably more than a purveyor of news; it can play a decisive role in political processes themselves. Consider, for example, the importance of the *Washington Post*'s coverage of Watergate; or more recently of the *New York Times*'s April 13, 1995, report that Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic was directly associated with the Bosnian concentration camps run by Serb paramilitaries and the systematic extermination of Muslim populations in the territory. Ted Turner's CNN goes a step further, providing uniform, 24-hour per day TV coverage around the world. In Turner's hands, the news becomes a purely commercial, uniform product, and simultaneously an important vehicle by which politicians and governments seek to influence world events. In 1991, a pan-Arab channel (MBC) was begun (out of London), and in 1993, the Europeans launched their own competitor (Euronews). In the same year, the United Kingdom's BBC went global.

No matter the medium in which it is delivered and no matter the care with which editorial freedom is protected, however, every news report is in some sense selective and therefore "biased." The journalist who composes it—or the team of journalists and editors who put it together—is choosing among the thousands and thousands of pieces of information available, on the basis of what might interest or please the "public," the owner, the state, one or another interest group, or a certain ideological position. One journalist may decide that, having been told of one instance of a development—let us say the first heart transplant—the public does not need to know about subsequent operations of the same type; another journalist, in contrast, may decide that the successful repetition of the operation is the important point, and she will thus continue to "follow the story." In fact, she is not "following" the story; she is creating it. The point is not, however, that one journalist is right and another wrong. The point is that journalists are always affecting the news, making one story "important," and another "unimportant," making "news" on one hand and "not-news" on the other.

Of course, no matter what story he or she is choosing to tell, the journalist is responsible for verifying sources, for making sure that the bits of information used are accurate. Recent scandals in the U.S. press have demonstrated how easily such responsibility can be abdicated. In the rush to "scoop," to keep up with the competition, journalists have sometimes

been exposed for making up facts or, in the case of a recent erroneous CNN-*Time* story about the U.S. government's use of nerve gases in the Gulf War, have been shown to have done sloppy investigations of their sources.

Let us close this discussion of the press's functions with a few comments for the scholar who would use the press—whether the premodern *avvisi* or the modern Internet flash—as a source. To employ these sources usefully, the historian must consider not just the content of the text, but its author and issuer, the publisher and its institutional location, the audience, and the immediate (political, social, economic) context of its original publication. It is surely true that sensational or tendentious reports can have a bigger effect on public opinion than a sober, careful report, and it may be that the historian will have to take the first more seriously than the second, for it was the first that had the greater impact. In addition, the historian must remember that the emission of a report itself can affect the events being reported, that there is no clear separation between the event and the report of the event. Normally, we imagine, a report of an event is *about* the event, not part of it. But sometimes this relationship is distorted, as when participants in a protest listen to reports about their actions as they go to the streets (a common event during the student revolts in the United States and Europe in the late 1960s and early 1970s), when voters have news of early returns in an election, or when reports of polls influence the next poll—or the vote itself.

Finally, the careful scholar will be attentive to what we might call "short-circuiting" of information flows, the distortion that occurs as information passes from hand to hand. Scholars using sources from oral cultures—folktales, for example—are very sensitive to such risks, for tales told orally can easily change in the telling, but even those historians using printed sources or the reports from electronic media are not free of these problems of interpretation. A message delivered electronically can be literally distorted, just as can a line of print or a story passed by mouth from generation to generation. The listener or reader can misinterpret what is reported, simply because he or she does not understand the linguistic or cultural code in which the message was written, or does not grasp the context of the message. Let us illustrate with a very simple example: what would a foreigner with very little ability in the English language make of an exchange between two Americans being formally introduced?—one offers her hand and says, "How do you do?"; the other replies in kind. Only someone deep in the culture can "read" that text!

D. Storing and Delivering Information

The archive is often considered the historian's principal source of information. The term has two meanings. In the most general sense, an archive is the collection of documents held by a natural or a legal person (for example, a government agency), and possibly also the copies of documents sent by these bodies to others. They are kept, of course, for practical reasons—to have a record of previous actions, both to assure administrative stability and to preserve useful ways of doing things and to preserve evidence for possible future legal proceedings. In a more technical sense, however, the term "archive" means the place or the institution itself that holds and manages the collection. In principle, diplomatic sources and social documents are kept in archives, narrative sources in libraries. But of course there are exceptions. By chance, as a result of gifts made to special institutions or the like, we sometimes find the reverse.

So long as an archive is growing and acquiring new material because the owner or the institution for which it is the repository is still active, it is considered a "living archive." When a collection, in part or in whole, is separated from the living archive, perhaps because it is considered of no value for ongoing operations, perhaps because the firm or the operation no longer exists, it is considered "old" or "historical." In that case the documents have lost their official or juridical status.

Until the end of the eighteenth century in the West, almost all archival material was held by its original owners or by the institution that produced the documents. Churches, monasteries, cities, and noble families kept their own papers and treasured objects themselves, usually in a special room or storage chest. Princes typically made their castles their depositories, and the archives traveled with them as they changed the seat of their operations. The medieval Council of Flanders, the highest court of the count of Flanders, kept its archive successively in Lille, Audenarde, Ghent, Ypres, then again, as of 1498, in Ghent.

The French Revolution brought a reversal of practice. The new state confiscated much of the property of the monasteries and lordships, along with their archives, and simultaneously demolished most of the administrative apparatus of the old regime; the result was a huge and sudden influx of documents to the new central state. In response, the new government created a central state archive, which was public; most other European lands soon followed suit.

The original structure of the new central archive was as follows: each constituted region of the country (in France, each *département*; elsewhere

the region might be the province, or even the county) established a depository to which were sent all documents originating in institutions that had once been at least partially subject to the rulers of this region. Thus, the collections of the Council of Flanders finally ended up the state archive in Ghent, capital city of East Flanders. Similarly, the archives of confiscated ecclesiastical institutions, of noble families, of the notaries who had worked in the district, and of the cities and parishes located in a French département found their way to the regional archive in the capital city of this département. Typically, the national capital (Paris, The Hague, Berlin, etc.) served as depository both for the region and for the nation, in the latter capacity holding the documents emanating from the central government.

Some local archives, particularly those of big cities, escaped this confiscation and today retain their own collections. In some parts of Europe, particularly in England, France, Belgium and The Netherlands, a great many additional local institutions have similarly kept their archives—parishes, monasteries, bishoprics, and private institutions. And everywhere there are some government agencies whose archives remain their own, just as there are still a few ordinary people (to be sure, people of some influence) who keep private archives.

In addition, in recent years some new independent archives have been created, usually attached to research institutes focused on a particular problem, a group of people, or a place. The new Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., is one such example. In The Netherlands, a center was founded in 1945 for research and study of the Second World War; in its collection is the original Anne Frank diary. Germany has special archives for business affairs in Cologne and Dortmund, and the United States has, for example, a Ford archive in Detroit.

Until recently it was generally accepted that public archives should hold only public documents, that they should not, in fact, acquire the holdings of private families and private institutions, no matter how important historically. Now that has changed. Since 1959 the British Public Record Office has welcomed gifts of private papers, and a law of 1955 allowed the Royal Archive of Belgium to collect private papers of families, firms, and political figures. But these efforts are in many instances too late. As a result, the collections of many private individuals and institutions, if they have been preserved at all, are held in universities (Harvard University, for example, houses an archive concerning the industrial history of the United States), in private archives (the presidential archives in different locations of the United States), or in museums (Gladstone's papers are in the British Museum Library).

Sources of other kinds, most of them unwritten, are typically held in other depositories. Museums, for example, are the usual repositories for archaeological finds, artworks, and similar objects; libraries often house coin and medal collections; film and record libraries have been established for special collections (the Museum of Modern Art in New York, for example, collects dramatic films made since 1936; the Federal Archive in Coblenz, Germany, archives films made during Hitler's Third Reich).

Archives in Europe and North America today follow generally standard practices in organizing their holdings. For the historical archive, the most important principle of organization is place of origin, or provenance. No principle is more important because any isolated document, without such information, is practically worthless to the historian, just as a potsherd or a coin is of little historical value unless we can identify its provenance. We have to know where a document was found and where it was stored if we are to assess its import—its intellectual origins, its place and time of creation and use. Let us take a banal example: the address book belonging to James McCord, one of the men convicted of breaking into Democratic headquarters in the Watergate Building in 1972, with its reference to "Howard Hunt, White H(ouse)" would have had a different (and probably trivial) significance had it been found anywhere but in the rooms McCord and the other Republican burglars had hired in the complex. Having been found there, it played a decisive role in the history of this seminal case, since the address book suggested that the White House and even the president were involved in the affair.

The key notation for each piece of archival material is, thus, its provenance, and archives typically classify their holdings according to their (bureaucratic or physical) location at the time the archive was "living." This was not always the practice, however; in the early nineteenth century, archives usually classified their collections according to date order or by topic, thus without regard to their provenance. It is only since 1841 in France, and somewhat later elsewhere in the West, that new protocols prevailed under which collections were kept intact and, within each collection, the provenance was carefully noted.

The kinds of documents on which historians have traditionally relied are preeminently the creation of states and statelike institutions (the church, charitable and educational establishments, etc.) because by their very nature these bodies produce and must keep records of their existence and their operations. It is thus no wonder that the first archives of real significance in postclassical Western history come to us from the first great state-builders, for example from the twelfth-century pope Innocent III, or the French king Philip Augustus. So important were these archives

to such princes that they carried them with them, housed in specially guarded trunks, as they voyaged throughout their realms. How fragile, how unsatisfactory, this system was becomes apparent when we consider that during the battle of Fréteval in 1194, the entire French national archive went up in smoke! It is even less surprising that the best collections of documents that come to us from this age treat fiscal and legal matters, for it was documents of this nature that evidenced (and assured) political authority.

Notarial documents (documents written and authenticated by specially trained and licensed professionals, rather like modern-day lawyers) created to secure property and legal rights constitute the bulk of the traditional private archival record. The documents have survived so well not just because they were important to the people involved, but because notaries were typically obligated to preserve them and to pass them on, at the end of their service, to their successors or to the state that licensed them. The office of notary was created in Roman times and was revived in thirteenth-century Italy, spreading into the rest of Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Business enterprises and private institutions had equally good reasons to create and preserve documents of this kind, but because their institutional lives were typically shorter or more precarious than those of states themselves, few archives of this kind remain from the period before 1900. The survival of documents of other kinds—literary, artistic, personal—depends very much on the fortunes of the individuals involved and on historical chance.

Archives are also the creations of scholars and intellectuals who have organized to collect and preserve documents relating to the history of particular places, groups, or movements. Labor organizations have, for example, been particularly active in creating archives and making them available to scholars, as have certain religious and ethnic groups, such as the Mormons and American Jewish organizations. The process of archive creation is continuous, as history creates new sources and new needs for their preservation. For example, today the African National Congress is creating an official archive at both the University of Fort Hare in South Africa and the University of Connecticut in the United States. It will house documents that were for years hidden in three dozen countries during the party's underground struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

Although there are a dizzying and growing number of archives in the West, they have, in fact, preserved only a very small number of the documents and other materials actually produced in the past. One reason is

simply that so few events were actually recorded. Events considered too banal, too obvious, were not recorded by contemporaries and were noted only in conversation. The same thing still occurs today, of course, especially as the telephone and Internet replace the letter as the primary means of private communication; even the fax is no improvement, for the quality of the print of most fax machines assures the ephemerality of the messages so transmitted.

Second, it often occurred that the official who produced or originally collected a given document did not think it worth saving. It is modern historians' great loss that, for example, medieval princes typically did not keep copies of the letters they sent to vassals calling them to serve or the invitations to councils delivered to the mighty of the realm. Even trained archivists have made choices we would surely lament; a social historian might, for example, have treasured the nineteenth-century sewer plan that an archivist discarded once the modern sewerage plant was built.

Third, archives are frequently destroyed in catastrophe, fire, and war. In World War I, the entire municipal archive of the important medieval city of Ypres was burned down; the library of Alexandria, one of the great intellectual centers of the ancient world, was lost as the city declined in the late antique period; the municipal archive of Naples was demolished in 1943.

Fourth, many institutions and individuals simply do not seek aggressively enough to preserve their records. Private firms are notorious in this regard. It takes, therefore, a rare combination of favorable circumstances for a premodern private archive to have survived for us: a bankruptcy that creates a court case and thus moves business papers from private hands into the public realm, as happened in 1368 in the case of the banker Willem Ruweel of Bruges; a private firm that is transformed into a foundation, as happened in the case of the Datini of Prato; the operations of a single enterprise that remain for many years in the same family; an individual family member who collects the papers of his relatives, with an eye to posterity.

Fifth, there are basic technical reasons why an archive does not last, namely the quality of the material on which the record is kept. The ink used today, which is based on aniline, becomes virtually unreadable after about thirty years—and the ink from a typical ballpoint pen becomes unreadable after a few hours in the sun! Today, the original documents produced in the Nuremberg trials of 1945 are almost undecipherable. The quality of the paper used has as great an effect on the durability of documents. Paper manufactured before about 1840, being made of textiles ("rag") and of glues derived from the bones of animals, was long-lasting.

Most of the paper made during the next century was not, for the pine resin used as glue destroys its cellulose fibers (the paper being a wood product). While deacidification processes have since been developed and are being gradually applied to the most precious surviving records, and while much of the paper produced since 1945 is not similarly vulnerable, a huge proportion of the documents stored in libraries and archives today is threatened with extinction simply because the paper is rotting. We might well ask ourselves just how durable are the photocopies of our present-day letters—often the only version that is saved—and the faxes on which we are so dependent. Wallpaintings in caves—some of them of inestimable historical and artistic value—become very vulnerable once they are discovered, for the light that enters the cave, once it is opened, allows the growth of organisms that consume the paintings.

Sixth, and somewhat paradoxically, archives can fail scholars because there is *too much* to collect, and archivists become overwhelmed by the task of deciding what to save, what to discard. Since World War II, this problem has become acute. The huge influx of material into small archives with overworked staffs has meant that files cannot be cataloged and prepared for use quickly enough and become, in effect, inaccessible. By the 1960s this situation throughout the West had reached the crisis proportions described by Alvin Toffler in his *Future Shock*: the point when information is accumulating at so dizzying a pace that we are at risk of losing our social memory. Solutions are being sought by technical means (compact disks, microfilm) and by editing processes (sampling, selective triage). Microfilms can serve as a durable substitute for paper that is vulnerable to the effects of humidity or light. Microfilm has another advantage as well, for it can store vast quantities of information in relatively little space; it has also been used to create a kind of shadow archive, a duplicate copy of documents which might be in danger of loss or destruction (as in war).

Another solution is to create storage centers for documents that have lost their official use but cannot yet be properly archived. Such Record Centers have existed since 1941 in England and the United States. In this system, a document produced by a government agency is sent to the Record Center once it has lost its direct, short-term official use. In this intermediate Record Center the documents retain the cataloging system used by the originating institution. They can easily be consulted both by the officials of the administration whence they came and by researchers. At this stage, the archivists of the Record Center work with specialists from the historical archive to select those documents for transfer to the historical archive and to decide on the final cataloging system. At the end

of the process, which may require as much as thirty years to complete, the documents are transferred from the Record Center to the historical archive. In the meantime, however, they have been available to historians and other scholars.

But sources not only disappear; they also appear or come into existence. The boundaries of knowledge and expertise shift constantly, whether because new material is found or discovered, because material once closed to scrutiny becomes available (think of the archives in the former Soviet Union, many of which became available to Westerners only after 1989), or because the codes necessary to decipher a text are rediscovered. Michael Ventris's decoding of the Linear B alphabet in 1952 made, for example, Greek history before Homer newly comprehensible. Historians themselves sometimes create sources, when, for example, they conduct interviews with people who lived though the events being studied.

Many aspects about the past will, of course, never be known to us or to any historians because the questions we or our successors might ask are so different from those that might have occurred to the people we are studying. In the eleventh century, rulers did not take censuses because the size of the population they ruled was neither their concern nor a problem. And people were extraordinarily vague about such matters. In 1371, for example, the English Parliament declared a tax which was to be paid, they said, by the 45,000 parishes in England; in reality, there were at that time only 8,600 parishes in the whole realm!

Thus, to the extent we can produce estimates of population size for the premodern era in the West, we have to rely on sources produced for other purposes. Tax registers or other documents recording fiscal matters are the usual sources used for this purpose (but they can be very hard to mine for this information); parish records of births and deaths were not required in Christian Europe until the sixteenth century (the French were obliged, as of 1539, to keep such records; for the rest of the Catholic West, it took an ordinance from the Council of Trent, in 1563). Civil records of this kind were not kept until after the French Revolution.

Even when an archive exists, it is not always available to scholars. Private archives are technically closed and can be consulted only with the permission of the owner. Even public archives are often restricted. According to mutually agreed upon international conventions, access to documents less than thirty years old can be denied; in practice the limit is often closer to fifty or a hundred years. When private owners donate a collection to a public archive (such as a state archive), they typically require that access to those papers be closed for thirty to fifty years, usually because they do not want the embarrassment that could come with public use of their doc-