

On the Stratified Nature of Cultural Artefacts (and Why We Should Model Them as such)

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The primary job of an archival institution is to preserve historical artefacts and to make them available for future research. Connected with this, however, is a corollary: it is equally important that in doing so these institutions remain non-partisan with respect to the scholarly debates that such access seeks to engender. While the tension between these two requirements is not new, it is one that contemporary archivists in particular have to confront. For today, digital tools such as application ontologies promise to make archival knowledge available to a wider audience, with greater ease of access, and with a level of perspicuity never before imagined. However, in developing these ontologies and in making them workable, engineers frequently find themselves in a position where they are forced to resolve deep-seated and long-standing questions about the very nature of the archival material itself, thus embedding partisan views within the structure of the material's digital organisation and potentially prejudicing the outcomes of future research as a result.

In this talk, I will highlight one attempt to address this issue. We will first take a look at the theoretical background of this project. Based on the philosophy of Roman Ingarden – a Polish phenomenologist, whose seminal work *The Ontology of the Literary Work of Art* sought to resolve such issues almost one hundred years ago already –, we will see how his stratified ontology of cultural artefacts is uniquely adapted to the demands of our contemporary, digital world. We will subsequently illustrate these ideas by looking at several difficult cases currently faced by developers at the Wittgenstein Archives Bergen, and show how Ingarden's conception can be used to design an ontological model that accommodates diverse and even contradictory forms of knowledge without sacrificing its own internal consistency.