Book Review

Review of Robertson, Craig. 2021. *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 313 pp. US\$29.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9780472037094

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Throughout *The Filing Cabinet: A Vertical History of Information* (2021), Craig Robertson reminds us that “storage is not neutral.” The act of storing is never a neutral practice, and the storage object enables certain operations and not others. In fact, even the impulse to minimize or ignore the filing cabinet and the labour associated with it is a significant feature of the relations of power that play through the object. Robertson, evading the impulse to treat the filing cabinet as an unremarkable feature of the twentieth-century office, presents the filing cabinet as an exemplary site to rethink storage, framing it as a technology that made paper and information functional and emphasized certain economic and cultural priorities in the age of corporate capitalism.

In the preface, Robertson cheekily apprises the reader of the fact that, though this book may have some passing similarities with JoAnne Yates’ *Control Through Communication* (1989) and Cornelia Vismann’s *Files: Law and Media Technology* (2008), it is unique in its treatment of the filing cabinet and seizes upon insights from recent work in media materialism. The book proceeds by treating the filing cabinet as a critical piece of infrastructure of twentieth century government and capitalism, exploring the stakes of its ubiquity in workplaces and even homes and its profound embeddedness in the white, heteronormative, and cis-gendered middle-class life that was imagined as emblematic of corporate capitalism. According to Robertson, the ubiquity of the filing cabinet’s system of information management points to a historical valuation of a specific conceptualization of instrumental knowledge. Paying attention to the filing cabinet offers a way of making sense of the change in the way information became “grasp-able” physically and metaphorically, in the sense of “information” being understood in cursory yet actionable form. Through a materialist theory of technology, Robertson offers a sophisticated account of how the filing cabinet’s physicality and place in certain institutional settings shaped social dynamics and relationships, especially those of gender and labour, all of which had profound effects on the concepts of information and efficiency.

Structured in two parts, the book addresses the filing cabinet’s capacities as a storage container and the file worker as bound together in a system for organizing information. In the book’s first part, the cabinet’s structure provides a convenient gloss for interpreting the particular goals that informed the design and intended use of the file cabinet. It is treated through chapters that explore its uprightness, its enclosed quality, and the partitions that structure its interior. The data for these chapters reflect the views of those who produced, designed, marketed or otherwise championed the cause of the filing cabinet, which outline the

importance of the filing cabinet in fulsome detail and often in exalting tones. The second part of the book focuses on the work of filing, particularly by the disciplined female body that was called to operate this machine of corporate memory. For the proponents of this system, the work of filing meant overcoming the personality, desires, and physicality of the worker as technical problems that stood to complicate the efficiency and productivity of the file system. Here, Robertson relies on advertising materials, trade publications, textbooks, and other teaching materials as sources. These materials emphasize the embodied and mental techniques expected of this gendered body in order for it to be an efficient and unobtrusive vehicle for the mechanized act of remembering that the system was imagined to be as well as the broader middleclass (read: white) values this self-discipline was thought to be capable of imparting to file workers, which eventually moved from corporate spaces into the home.

A core element that runs throughout the book, not only its second half, is the idea that filing is a feminized category of labour associated with information. As Robertson argues, the filing cabinet not only concretized filing as a distinct activity within the corporate workplace but also was the catalyst for a specific moment in the technical division of labour at the office along the lines of gender. The change in the mode of file storage from the space of a desk to the filing cabinet effected a shift from the personal to the collective, making accessibility and ease of retrieval by a generic worker a priority. Robertson explains that, “via the logic that if anybody could file then only a woman should file, because a man could do other work that a woman could not do” (190), the filing cabinet’s variously “manual” and “automatic” relationship to information envisioned underpaid women to be the ideal file worker, since it meant leaving men to the mental work associated with the contents of the file. The physical work of filing came to be seen as a lesser form of labour characterized by an instrumental encounter with information that does not directly produce knowledge, “information labour.” Pivotal, this system for distinguishing between these two modes of “paperwork” in the name of efficiency rendered information and knowledge epistemologically distinct from one another. As I read, I was struck by the potential for Robertson’s book to springboard future feminist engagements with information labour.

This book, according to the author, is couched in a genre between critical media studies and history (xi). In spite of this niche, the treatment of such a novel research topic signals its wide-ranging interdisciplinary appeal, not in the least because of Robertson’s profound attention to the terminology associated with paper storage. In particular, researchers interested in the history of information, gender and labour, and corporate surveillance may find this book highly generative. Robertson also devises a choice few terms to tack down his specific focus on understanding how information was conceptualized, constituted, and organized, rather than understanding the need for information. One such term is “granular certainty,” which emphasizes the belief that breaking something down into smaller pieces made it easier to apprehend, understand, and control, is deployed to capture the move toward standardization in the name of efficiency as well as the conception of information as something discrete. The term also “highlights the specific moment when the classification of information became a temporal and spatial problem—that is, the moment when classification became a problem of efficiency, a problem of labour, and when storage became a problem of rapid retrieval” (18). As this example illustrates, the sense of precision that Robertson accomplishes is due to the book’s highly sophisticated framework. In this admirably self-contained and free-standing treatment of a previously overlooked topic, this book resembles its subject. Like its subject, its quietly elegant design may reveal its secrets to the user that had not appeared at first glance.

References

- Vismann, Cornelia. 2008. *Files: Law and Media Technology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Yates, JoAnne. 1989. *Control through Communication the Rise of System in American Management*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.