

The Probability Archive: from Essence to Uncertainty in the Growth of Knowledge

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From a 'cultural science' perspective, this paper traces one aspect of a more general shift, from the realist representational regime of modernity to the productive DIY systems of the internet era. It argues that the ideology of collecting and archiving is transformed by this change. Modern museums – and also broadcast television – were based on 'essence' theory; while internet archives like YouTube (and the internet as an archive) are based on 'probability' theory. The paper goes through the differences between modernist 'essence' and postmodern 'probability'; starting from the obvious difference that in a museum each object is selected by experts for its intrinsic properties, while on the internet you don't know what you will find. The status of individual objects is uncertain, although the productivity of the overall archive is unlimited. The paper links these differences with changes in contemporary culture – from a Newtonian to a quantum universe, progress to risk, institutional structure to evolutionary change, objectivity to uncertainty, identity to performance. Borrowing some of its methodology from science fiction, the paper uses examples and clips from museums and online archives, ranging from the oldest stone tool in the world to the latest tribute vid on the net.