

## **The Oil Archives**

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## **The Archive Function**

The historical archive of the oil company BP is housed in a low-rise building on the secluded modern campus of the University of Warwick in the English Midlands, two hours drive from London. This is an archive of a traditional kind. It contains documents relating to the long history of BP, dating from its origins as the Anglo-Persian oil company, to its later incarnation as the state owned British Petroleum, and its more recent transformation into one of the world's largest multinational corporations. Interested researchers are advised that they can gain access to the Warwick archive and its catalogue by contacting its archivists directly. The archive forms the basis for three weighty volumes of official history published by Cambridge University Press (Ferriet 1982, Bamberg 2009 & 2010).

But along with this historical archive, located on the campus of a British University, BP also maintains what one might call an open archive, which is continuously updated and made publically available on the Internet. This latter archive contains an expanding range of documents, which include company annual reports, magazines and glossy publicity material, as might be expected, but also a vast range of more technical and legal documents, which address subjects ranging from environmental performance, social responsibility, and renewable energy, to accidents and oil spills. Similar archives can be accessed through the websites of other major oil corporations, including Exxon and Royal Dutch Shell. It is these active and open archives that, in this chapter, I term the oil archives. While the oil archives are growing and substantial, my aim is not to provide a

survey of the range of material now made available, nor do I document the variability of corporate practice in the production of such archives. Rather, I address a series of more general questions concerning how one might understand the politics of the oil archives, their emergence, purposes and constitution. My contention is that any analysis of archival politics must attend not just to their contents, but also to their shifting and contested limits.

In the introduction to her book *Archive Stories*, the historian Antoinette Burton observes that colonial “archives are not sources or repositories as such, but constitute full-fledged historical actors as well”. Colonial archives, she contends, “served as technologies of imperial power, conquest, and hegemony” (Burton 2005, 7). Burton’s point is a reminder that the analysis of an archive needs to address the question of what an archive does, and the forms of power with which it is associated, rather than take the archive merely as a source of documentary evidence or fact. Moreover, the generation and organisation of archives demands interrogation. “Our insistence”, she goes on to argue, “on the necessity of talking about the backstage of archives – how they are constructed, policed, experienced, and manipulated – stems equally from our sense that even the most sophisticated work on archives has not gone far enough in addressing head-on the lingering presumptions about, and attachments to, the claims to objectivity with which archives have been historically synonymous” (ibid.). Burton’s observations, I suggest, provide a helpful starting point for an analysis of the oil archives.

The following argument is organised into three parts. In the first part I consider the historical emergence of what I have termed the oil archives and their multiple audiences. In the second part I address the question of their contents and internal organisation, and the spatiality and temporality of their production and use. The third part addresses the relations between the documentary archive and the multiple encounters between researchers, activists, affected populations and oil corporations in the field. Finally, I turn to the question of the presence and absence of technical data and research reports in the archives. My aim in this chapter is to understand the oil archives as full-fledged political actors in the present.

## **Emergence**

The growth of what I have termed the oil archives is a recent phenomenon. Indeed, their progressive formation arose from three related movements that gathered force in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and acquired particular salience in the early 2000s. One was the recognition on the part of oil corporations that they were faced with growing opposition from a range of sources, including investors and consumers, affected populations in oil-producing regions and “a small army of civil society groups, watchdog agencies, and NGOs devoted to the monitoring and surveillance of corporate activity” (Watts 2005, 375). In these circumstances, corporations sustained what were increasingly viewed by the industry as substantial reputational losses from events such as the Exxon Valdez disaster, the controversy that erupted around the dumping of the Brent Spar in the North Sea, and the ongoing conflicts in the Niger Delta, including the death of Ken Saro-Wiwa. Attending to

the growing significance of ‘reputational risk’, and growing pressure from investors (Clark and Hebb 2005), corporations sought both to demonstrate their commitment to the ethical values of corporate responsibility and to publish accounts that might provide an alternative to the influential stories told by their critics (Power 2007).

Secondly, and relatedly, multinational corporations came to be both the objects and agents of what has come to be called ‘transnational governance’ (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson 2006, Hale and Held 2011, Barry 2012). This umbrella term refers to an array of overlapping laws, voluntary guidelines, and standards, the development of which has been driven by the combined force of professional communities, national governments and a range of international organisations, NGOs and activists. To take three of the more influential measures: the Åarhus convention ‘On Access to Information, Public Participation and Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters’ (UNECE 1998); the ‘Equator Principles’, first introduced in 2003 as a ‘financial industry benchmark’ for managing the environmental and social risks of large industrial projects, which stipulates that clients should demonstrate ‘effective stakeholder engagement’ (Equator Principles 2013, 7); and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) guidelines on multinational enterprises, which now expect that firms should “establish measurable [environmental] objectives and, where appropriate, targets for environmental performance and resource utilisation” (OECD 2011, 42). The implementation of the World Bank’s policies on ‘indigenous people’, to take as another example, requires oil companies to document the impact of their operations on the ‘livelihoods’ of indigenous people (Gilberthorpe and Hilson 2014). In short, the social

and environmental responsibilities of corporations have increasingly come to be judged against a growing body of transnational guidelines, standards and soft laws, thereby generating further material for inclusion in the burgeoning oil archives.

A third movement informing the progressive expansion of the oil archives has been the increasing stress on the importance of transparency as both a political principle and a set of technical practices; a technology of government (Foucault 2008). In this respect, the oil industry has not been unusual. After all, there have been growing demands for greater transparency across cognate fields such as public administration and finance (Hood 2006). However, the idea of transparency has come to have particular salience in the oil industry, and an influential justification. Economists such as Paul Collier and Joseph Stiglitz extolled the value of transparency as a solution to some of the problems of the oil industry, the operations of which are all too often associated with corruption and violence, or with what has come to be termed the ‘resource curse’ (Bannon and Collier 2003, cf Weszkalnys 2011). As a result, the governments of oil-producing states such as Azerbaijan and Nigeria have confirmed and demonstrated their commitment to the value of transparency by signing up to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) (Aaronson 2011). Multinational corporations such as BP, ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell have publicised their support for EITI, according to which companies are expected to publish what they pay to governments, and the governments of oil-producing states to publish what they receive. Moreover, international NGOs such as Global Witness have promoted transparency, and supported its development, while also criticising the limits of transparency in practice. Transparency was said both to address the problem of the

resource curse and to foster, according to one group of advisors to BP, “the free exchange of ideas” (Caspian Development Advisory Panel 2003, 13; Barry 2013, chapter 3). In the opinion of Sir John Browne, CEO of BP, EITI would help to reduce the “ongoing criticism” by NGOs of the governments of oil-producing states, such as Angola, but also by implication, of multinationals (Browne 2010, 116). Nonetheless, the financial transparency demanded of signatories to EITI was and remains quite limited, and its existence only explains the existence of a small fraction of the oil archives.

At this point I want to make two observations. First, it would be a mistake to view the expansion of the oil archives as simply another element of corporate public relations, although they do include public relations material. On the one hand, they are the product of a multitude of negotiations, compromises and disputes between oil companies, national governments, consultancies, financial lenders, academics, international organisations and their critics. The emergence of the oil archives is both the product of conflict between corporations, international organisations and their civil society critics and an attempt on the part of corporations and international institutions to govern such relations. In his book *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida observed that “effective democratization [of the archive] can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation” (Derrida, 1996, 4). In this light, the oil archives have not become ‘effectively democratised’, to use Derrida’s terms. Oil corporations and their consultants remain responsible for their constitution. Nonetheless, the interpretation of the archives depends on the proliferation of other public accounts of oil industry operations, whether these emanate from

government regulators, parliamentary inquiries, international financial institutions, news media, environmental or human rights NGOs, as well as people and businesses affected by accidents and disasters (e.g. BP 2014a). The oil archives exist in conjunction with other sets of documents such as the archives of international organisations and NGOs, which may also be extensive.

Second, as Burton's observations about colonial archives would lead us to expect, the oil archives have always been much more than mere repositories of documents that might subsequently be deposited in a corporation's historical archive, only to be consulted by scholars at a later date. After all, the archives address a series of quite specific and selective concerns, raised by the ongoing and escalating demands and requirements of transnational governance, international financial institutions, shareholders and NGOs. At the same time, they reflect the corporation's response not just to such pressures, but to the consequences of specific technical failures, accidents, acts of sabotage, and environmental disasters. Any analysis of the politics of the oil archives must necessarily address not just their relation to wider concerns with transparency, reputational risks and transnational governance, but to the specific events that these the oil multinationals' activities continue to generate.

## **Constitution**

The contrast between the BP archive at Warwick University and the archive of documents made publically available on the Internet seems clear enough. One archive is



located in a particular place and is accessible with permission, to students, teachers, and researchers, “or somebody who is simply curious about the history of energy or our company” (BP 2014b). Whereas the other set of archives is openly accessible, and requires no permission to consult. But the contrast is not as straightforward as it might appear.

First, as anthropologists and geographers have argued, the production and consumption of new media is never placeless. It occurs in specific material settings including internet cafes, domestic spaces and offices (Slater 2013). Although in principle the oil archives are accessible to anyone with access to the Internet, in practice they are likely to be read by metropolitan professionals, investors, bankers, officials and activists. The oil archives have been made public, but they are addressed to a very specific group of professionals, or particular representatives of the public, not the *public in general* (Osborne 1999, 54). Moreover, they are not the product of one agency (the corporation) but of a series of international financial institutions, investment banks, regulatory agencies, service firms, and specialist consultancies, as well as the corporations themselves, that sustain and form part of the wider oil complex.

Secondly, the documents contained in the archive have their own biographies, and have existed in earlier material and textual forms. They may have been drafted by specialist consultants as well as corporate employees, circulated between managers, government officials and interested outsiders, and edited and redrafted. Only subsequently are they deposited in the archive. If the archives are, as Burton argues, ‘historical actors’, then the

agency of specific documents occurs both before as well as after their inclusion and publication in the archive. In short, the oil archives have a temporality, which is difficult for the researcher to investigate, but which is critical to their politics. Access to documents is not just effectively restricted to particular readers due to the variable availability and quality of translations, for example, but also by timing of their release.

But while the oil archives function in part as a brochure for investors, some archives include much more detailed analyses of specific regions and projects, their projected future, and their ongoing development. Esso, for example, established what they term a ‘library’, which holds a substantial body of documentation about the Chad-Cameroon pipeline, including reports on such matters as educational programs, oil spill response plans, reports on biodiversity, and notes of major and minor incidents along the pipeline route such as oil spills, as well as accounts of the consultation process. Indeed, according to Esso, ‘no other infrastructure project in Africa or perhaps in the world has conducted as much public consultation as the Chad/Cameroon Development Project’ (Esso 2014). The existence of this library, and the extent of the consultation process that it documents, reflects, in part, the involvement of the World Bank in the project. In order to continue to push back the geographical and technical frontier (Watts 2012, 464), the oil corporation must be seen to be able to govern social and environmental impact of its operations.

BP’s archive of material on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, a \$3.9bn project also supported by the World Bank, is arguably on an even larger in scale than the Chad/Cameroon archive. As well as a series of agreements between the consortium of oil

companies of which BP is a part, this archive contains documents relating to at least five ‘layers’ of monitoring by, amongst others, a committee of senior advisors, environmental and social specialists, reports by external consultants working on behalf of BP on specific operational matters. One of the explicit functions of the publication of so much material was to render BTC accountable to stakeholders and civil society organisations. But the contents of the archive also incorporate a degree of institutionalized reflexivity (Born 2002, 81), addressing, pre-empting and incorporating the views of external critics, while also raising additional internal criticisms (Barry 2013, 80). For example, BP briefly established a local NGO ‘Pipeline Monitoring Dialogue Initiative’, with support and financial assistance from the World Bank, the UNDP and other agencies (Begiashvili et al 2006). In these circumstances, the contents of the Chad-Cameroon and BTC pipeline archives go far beyond that provided in corporate publicity material. They appear to provide an excess of detail about a vast range of matters, ranging from road safety and biodiversity, to oil spills and oil spill response plans, apparently demonstrating that the corporation has taken potential risks and criticisms into account and anticipated the concerns of affected populations and other stakeholders. Shell’s annual report on sustainability, for example, also acknowledges the importance of criticism: “If we fall short of the standards society expects of us, we learn from our experiences to improve the way we operate” (Shell 2012, 4). Demonstrations of the capacity to incorporate criticism and to engage in self-criticism both form part of the archives. If the oil corporations, along with the international financial institutions, were once regarded as arrogant, the archives project an image of humility and piety as well as confidence (cf Best 2013).

The scale and scope of these archives provokes, I suggest, three possible critical responses. One response is that the quantity of documentation contained in the archive has the (intended) effect of overwhelming possible criticisms. In this view, the range of expertise available to an oil corporation, the publication of so much documentation and the explicit willingness of corporations to listen to their critics together provide an effective form of legitimation, defending the corporation against the threat of substantial reputational damage. A second response is not to point to the scale of the archives and their function as legitimation devices, but to question some of the specific factual claims that they contain. Indeed, critics may point both to the failure of oil corporations to address relevant international guidelines and principles, and to the existence of discrepancies between what a corporation's publications say about its operations and what the corporation does in practice. A third critical response, which I emphasise here, focuses not on what is present in the archives, and its limitations, but on what is more or less systematically absent. If the progressive development of the archives both fosters and responds to controversy, it also serves to channel debate towards a quite specific set of questions. In this way, criticism is enabled but it is also, at the same time, contained within limits. The latter two of these critical responses direct us to consider the relation between the contents of archives and the operations of the oil corporations in the field, to which the production of the archive contributes. It is to this relation that I now turn.

### **The Archive and the Field**

As the oil archives have expanded in scope and scale, they have also generated internal tensions. One evident tension exists between the smooth narratives of corporate publicity and the stories that may be contained in the more detailed reports of on-going operations and events contained in the archives. The sociologist of science Michael Lynch observes that archives “are not always coherent and they may contain a surplus of material which may enable adversarial readings” (Lynch 1999, 79). Lynch himself was reflecting on the archive of material generated during the investigation of the Iran-Contra scandal.

However, his point is relevant to the study of the oil archives, which also produce, as he puts it, a ‘surplus of material’. The oil archives, which contain such a heterogeneous range of documents, inevitably contain a multitude of incoherencies and inconsistencies, depending upon how they are read, and by whom. How is it possible for a corporation to state its commitment to the value of environmental sustainability and also be responsible for a large number of oil spillages for example? Or to claim that it is committed to public consultation, yet also be the subject of complaints by those who claim not to have been consulted? In brief, the progressive expansion of the oil archives also creates the potential for criticism, which ferment in the evident gaps between corporate publicity and more detailed accounts of corporate operations generated in the field. In practice, the oil archives do not smooth over these gaps, but instead may provide external observers with evidence of their existence.

Nonetheless, while the formation of the archives raises questions about their veracity and coherence, they are also restricted in their focus. They provide material for certain lines of criticism, but not for others. This occurs in two ways. First, published documents tend

to address a specific set of issues, such as threats to biodiversity and the need for public consultation, that reflect the range of guidelines, regulations and standards that the corporation is expected to enact. At the same time, the archives do not address a series of other potential problems, such as poor working conditions or low wages, that could in principle become matters for wider public debate (Barry 2013, 172). Secondly, the publication of the oil archives directs attention to the way in which documents have been produced, or what Burton terms the ‘backstage’ of the archive. Many of the disputes that erupted along the route of the BTC pipeline, for example, did not revolve around the environmental and social impact of the pipeline itself, but rather around the way in which the social impact of pipeline construction had been assessed. For example, the BTC archive contained a document claiming that a particular village in Turkey had been consulted about the construction of the pipeline in its vicinity (ibid., 108). However, critical NGOs pointed out that the village was unoccupied during the consultation process and that a document available in the archive on the BP website that stated that the village was consulted by the company must therefore be mistaken. On the basis of this case, NGOs cast doubt on BP’s claim that it had properly carried out its program of public consultation, arguing thereby that it had contravened the stipulations of the World Bank. In this case and others, the politics of the archive revolved around the question of how the contents of the archive were themselves produced. In this way, the production of the archives, or their ‘backstage’, may become ‘frontstage’.

Yet if the archives appear to reveal a great deal, however imperfectly, they also leave a great deal unsaid. Critical readers may wonder when consulting the archives why

something that they know, or imagine is the case, is not contained in the archives. It may be perfectly clear, for example, to the residents of a village that officials have fraudulently appropriated compensation payments that were due to be paid by an oil company to them, but this is not addressed in published documents. Or it may be rightly or wrongly thought that a nominally independent NGO is working on behalf of a government, but this is never mentioned in the archives. If one of wider functions of the development of transparency is to reduce the level of corruption and violence, as some influential economists have argued, then the complexity and dynamics of corruption and violence are not addressed by the transparency of the archives. If ‘everyone knows’ that the development of the oil industry is associated with state interests, then the nature of the relation between oil corporations and states is barely described. As the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler argues, in relation to the study of colonial archives, the analyst needs “to distinguish what was ‘unwritten’ because it could go without saying and ‘everyone knew it’, what was unwritten because it could not yet be articulated, and was unwritten because it could not be said” (Stoler 2009, 3). Her observations about the limits of colonial archive have particular salience for those interested in the politics of the oil archives. For if the archives are political technologies, they also forge a distinction between the transnational politics of corporate social and environmental responsibility and the national politics of the state (Mitchell 1999). In this respect, the public record of Shell’s decision to make an out of court settlement in the case of Ken Saro-Wiwa, for example, is a rare acknowledgement of a relation between the oil corporation and public politics, one that is seldom addressed explicitly in the archives (Brinded 2009). Indeed, in general, the archives are remarkable in their discretion about the relations between the oil

corporations and the states of both oil-producing and oil-consuming countries. Whereas historians tell us about the entanglement of oil corporations and imperial rule, similar concerns remain at the margins of the oil archives.

### **Archived Materials**

The historian of science Lorraine Daston has recently drawn attention to the critical importance of those sciences that make use of archived data such as astronomy, geology, demography, and meteorology. “Since the mid- nineteenth century’, Daston observes, “it has been a melancholy academic commonplace that whereas the humanities are the guardians of memory, the sciences cultivate amnesia” (Daston 2012, 156). Contesting this view, Daston highlights the value of archives to research in fields such as that address phenomena over what she terms ‘superhuman’ timescales (ibid. 160). Indeed, the importance of historical data for climate change research is well understood.

While Daston’s argument is an important one, what she terms the ‘sciences of the archive’ are not just concerned with phenomena such as climate change that extend over superhuman timescales. There are also sciences of the archive that are concerned with the ongoing environmental performance of industries such as oil, thereby addressing the widespread expectation that corporations both “establish measurable [environmental] objectives” (OECD 2011) and make their performance against these objectives public. This is manifested in the form of reports covering such matters as, *inter alia*, CO<sub>2</sub> and other green house gas emissions, production levels, landslides, traffic accidents, levels of



flaring, oil spills and sabotage, and the energy efficiency of refineries and chemical plants (see, for example, Shell 2014). The infrastructure of the oil industry includes pipes, drills, incinerators, platforms, tankers, trains and rigs, but it has also come to include a growing metrological infrastructure of monitoring devices, performance reviews and inspections, and systems of calculation and comparison that track the state and behaviour of the material infrastructure of oil, thereby contributing to the progressive expansion of the archives (Barry 2006). The industry often operates offshore, underground, or is contained in enclosed enclaves (Appel 2011). But it is nonetheless increasingly visible in the form of growing quantities of information that are routinely produced and made public. The authors of a technical paper on the problem of trench excavation along the route of an Algerian gas pipeline made the following unexpected claim: ‘there is an increasing need in modern projects to *communicate terrain data* between many stakeholders, in a way that is systematic, auditable and transparent’ (Fookes et al 2004: 144, emphasis added). In the view of these pipeline engineers, interested stakeholders need to know not just about construction costs and routes, but about the state of the terrain that might potentially lead to a rupture in the pipeline in the future. The relations between pipes and rocks in Algeria have become, in principle, a matter for inclusion in the archives.

Nonetheless, if the oil industry has itself come to support the ‘sciences of the archive’ there is an evident difference between the forms of archival data and research discussed by historians of science, such as Daston, and the research reported in the oil archives. For while research in fields such astronomy, demography and meteorology is widely thought to be in the public interest, and substantially funded by public sources, the sciences of the

oil archives are not. There is a clear contrast, in particular, between the level of public support for research on climate research and the absence of publically funded research on oil and other fossil fuel resources. In these circumstances, many national governments are poorly equipped to monitor the conduct of the oil industry, or assess the risks posed by the development of unconventional resources, or to generate their own data on the industry's environmental impact in these circumstances. Moreover, debates about the quality of data that is made public by the oil corporations does not take place within the agonistic space of an interdisciplinary scientific field, as it does in the case of climate change research. Rather, they are likely to occur in the antagonistic space that has developed between the corporations and their critics. In effect, the corporate sciences of the archive have come to exist in conjunction with what we might call, following Ulrich Beck, counter-sciences of the archive, sometimes linked to the work of NGOs such as Amnesty International and Friends of the Earth (Beck 1992). Counter-scientific research, which is relatively poorly resourced, may direct attention to the weaknesses and uncertainties of the data published by corporations including, to give one example, the 'widespread under-reporting' of oil spills and sabotage in Nigeria (Amnesty International 2009, 16; cited in Watts 2012).

However, the quantity of scientific data made public by multinational corporations cannot be understood simply as a response to the multiple demands of international institutions and investors, or even the counter-claims of critics. It also necessarily reflects the complex materiality of the industrial process, which both generates a series of pollutants (e.g. methane, SO<sub>x</sub>, hydro-flouorocarbons, oil and its impurities) and the growing series of

technical challenges posed by the drive by corporations to exploit new sources of carbon. Thus Statoil inform us of their work in modelling in Giant Carbonate reservoirs in southwestern Iran (Statoil 2014), while Total its their readers both the quality of their expertise in fracking and other unconventional extraction methods, and of their concern to engage in consultation with affected communities, in order to identify impacts that can be “included in the project cost analysis’ (Total 2014, 7). Such accounts of technological innovation remind us that the capacity of the oil industry to appropriate new sources of carbon is associated with an on-going process of technical innovation, in materials, diagnostic techniques, drilling systems, geographical information systems, modelling, and refining (cf Bowker 1994).

But while the archives therefore tell us a something about the technical dynamism of the industry, they do not contain accounts of the research methods, instrument designs and results that one would expect to find in a scientific paper. They direct careful readers towards the broad concerns of corporate material scientists, chemical engineers, and geophysicists amongst others, but they convey little of the limitations of their investigations, their models, or the information to which they have access. The assessment of geohazards, for example, is fraught with uncertainty. Geohazards need to be monitored, managed and modelled, but modelling is an imprecise art, and its imprecision may be compounded by a lack of historical data about the occurrence of landslides and earthquakes in many of the regions in which the oil industry now operates (Sweeney 2004). Or consider the corrosion of infrastructures such as pipelines and rigs. Steel structures such as pipes will corrode and suffer from fatigue stress over time, but

the rate of corrosion of a complex structure will depend on local environmental conditions and can only be monitored remotely or through visual inspection. In these ways the risk of geohazards and corrosion may be unclear or poorly described. The archives provide us with a record of the industry's environmental impacts, but they tell us little about the assemblages of material as well as human agencies that generate such impacts (Braun and Whatmore 2010).

There are thus clear limits to the quality and form of technical detail provided in even the most extensive archives. Sociologists of scientific knowledge have observed how the messy processes of scientific research and technical research are progressively purified in the polished form of the published scientific paper (Latour 1987). But many of the reports of the scientific and technical activity of the oil industry published in the archives are doubly purified. On the one hand, they are purified of any account of the messiness of the research process as described by sociologists of scientific knowledge. On the other hand, they tend not to contain the original reports of the corporate researchers and consultants, which may document the limitations of available data, the variability of environmental conditions, the assumptions built into predictive models and the uncertainties that are a normal feature of scientific research (McGoey 2007, Barry 2013, chapter 6). The oil archives tell us a great deal about the desire of corporations to push back geographical and technical frontiers, but little about the inevitable limitations of the expertise that they employ. The political limits of the archives are scientific and technical as much as they are political in the conventional sense of the term.

## Conclusions

As Ann Laura Stoler has argued, in order to understand the significance of colonial archives, it is critical to consider not just what they contain but also what they do not contain. Stoler's point applies equally to the study of the oil archives. Certainly, the analyst of the oil archives has much to learn from an inspection of their contents. The growing range of documents made public by oil corporations cannot be understood as mere fictions, whatever their inaccuracies and limits. In practice they tell us a great deal about the operations of corporations, particularly when read in conjunction with the accounts produced by international institutions, and national and international NGOs. At the same time the oil archives are technologies of a form of transnational governmentality, in which practices of impact assessment, risk management and transparency have come to play a central part, and in which corporations themselves have assumed a critical role.

Yet the oil archives are marked by systematic absences. They do not address, except in passing, the question of the relation between corporations and the states of both oil-producing and oil-consuming countries, and in this way they evade what Béatrice Hibou has termed the 'political problem' (Hibou 2011: 282). And despite the importance of monitoring, assessment and research to the operations of the industry, the archives are discreet about the rigour, uncertainties and limitations of the research on which they report and the data that they make public. The archives are far from being effectively democratised. Those concerned with the democratisation of the archives need to address

not only the relation between the archives and the law, but also the degree to which the technical content of the archives is open for inspection.

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