Since their publication in 1971 the Pentagon Papers have been examined seemingly from every possible historical, political, legal and ethical angle.

But to Lisa Gitelman, a professor of English and media studies at New York University, there’s at least one aspect of Daniel Ellsberg’s leaking of top-secret Defense Department documents that scholars have failed to consider adequately: the Xerox technology that allowed him to copy them in the first place.

Actually, make that “copy and recopy.” In a chapter of her book in progress about the history of documents Ms. Gitelman describes the way Mr. Ellsberg obsessively made copies of his copies, even enlisting the help of his children in what she describes as an act of radical self-publishing.

“Even though we think of copying now as perfunctorily ripping something off, he was expressing himself by Xeroxing,” she said.

The Pentagon Papers were a landmark, in her view, not just
in the antiwar movement, but in a “Xerox revolution” that allowed citizens to seize hold of official documents, and official knowledge, and turn them to their own purposes as never before.

Ms. Gitelman’s argument may seem like an odd lens on familiar history. But it’s representative of an emerging body of work that might be called “paperwork studies.” True, there are not yet any dedicated journals or conferences. But in history, anthropology, literature and media studies departments and beyond, a group of loosely connected scholars are taking a fresh look at office memos, government documents and corporate records, not just for what they say but also for how they circulate and the sometimes unpredictable things they do.
Before the digital revolution, high stacks of office documents were common. They still are. Bob Peterson/Time Life Pictures, via Getty Images

Scholars “have always looked through documents,” said Ben Kafka, a historian at N.Y.U. and the author of “The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork,” recently published by Zone Books. “More and more they are also looking at them.”

If paperwork studies have an unofficial standard-bearer and theoretician, it’s Mr. Kafka. In “The Demon of Writing” he lays out a concise if eccentric intellectual history of people’s relationship with the paperwork that governs (and gums up) so many aspects of modern life. The rise of modern bureaucracy is a well-established topic in sociology and
political science, where it is often related as a tale of increasing order and rationality. But the paper’s-eye view championed by Mr. Kafka tells a more chaotic story of things going wrong, or at least getting seriously messy.

It’s an idea that makes perfect sense to any modern cubicle dweller whose overflowing desk stands as a rebuke to the utopian promise of the paperless office. But Mr. Kafka traces the modern age of paperwork to the French Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which guaranteed citizens the right to request a full accounting of the government. An explosion of paper followed, along with jokes, gripes and tirades against the indignity of rule by paper-pushing clerks, a fair number of whom, judging from the stories in Mr. Kafka’s book, went mad.

“The Demon of Writing” takes in Marx, Freud, Tocqueville and Jim Henson — who in his pre-“Muppets” days made a surreal promotional video for an early IBM word processor called “The Paperwork Explosion.” Mr. Kafka’s eclectic approach has impressed, if not totally convinced, his fellow historians. Robert Darnton, writing in The New York Review of Books, praised the book’s “conceptual nimbleness” while questioning the idea that the French Revolution is a story of cluttered desks.

But for other scholars, putting the “bureau” back in bureaucracy, as Mr. Kafka likes to say, means looking, quite
literally, at office furniture itself. Craig Robertson, an associate professor of media and screen studies at Northeastern University, is writing a history of the filing cabinet, a subject he hit on, he said, while researching his previous book, “The Passport in America.”

In 1909 the State Department introduced vertical filing systems with a decimal index, replacing hard-to-search bound volumes. “My research just changed,” Mr. Robertson recalled. “I hadn’t stopped to think about how radical vertical filing was. All of a sudden you could retrieve things.”

Clerks also suddenly needed an entirely new set of skills that seemed as baffling as mastering the latest version of Microsoft Office can seem today. Mr. Robertson points to early-20th-century office supply catalogs listing dozens of options for alphabetical tags (Aa-Ar or Aa-As?) and ads for courses, lasting hundreds of hours, teaching the ins and outs of complex filing systems. “There’s a literacy associated with documentation,” he said. “This was a skill people had to learn.”

Mr. Robertson sees the history of the filing cabinet and the passport alike as part of an early-20th-century “paperization” of everyday life, where things that had once been vouched for personally required complex official documentation, with sometimes confounding results. (His book on the passport begins with a 1923 newspaper article
Paperwork is drawing particular attention among anthropologists, who see it as a window into the gaps between what official policy says and how it is carried out on the ground. At the American Anthropological Association’s annual meeting in November, Matthew Hull, an associate professor at the University of Michigan, ran an informal “document clinic” to help young scholars figure out how to understand the role of official paperwork in, say, psychiatric hospitals in Kashmir, or campaigns against genetically modified crops in Latin America.

Mr. Hull’s new book, “Government of Paper” (University of California Press), examines the hypertrophied paperwork of Pakistan, where official decisions about building permits, say, or land disputes must be enacted by an elaborate system of signatures and notes attached to original files, which can be easily hoarded and diverted.

“To control the movement of the files is to control the issue,” he said.

And sometimes the flow of cash: His book notes how in the
1990s Asif Ali Zardari, the husband of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, reportedly authorized extralegal business deals via removable Post-it notes attached to original files — paperwork without a paper trail.

But taking the file’s-eye view, Mr. Hull said, reveals just how much of what goes on in a bureaucracy reflects the influence of the paperwork itself. Often, he said, “how things happen doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with what people want.”

Some paper pushers, of course, do manage to make things go wrong in the right way. The unofficial hero of Mr. Kafka’s book is Charles Hippolyte Labussière, a French government clerk who in 1794 purportedly saved hundreds of people from the guillotine by dissolving the relevant paperwork in Paris’s public baths (or, as one version of the story has it, eating it).

Ms. Gitelman sees a kindred spirit in Mr. Ellsberg, whose rogue photocopying, she argues, finds echoes in the “just in case” dossier where many office workers store dirt on their bosses. Today if his smudged photocopies seem quaint in the era of PDFs and WikiLeaks, digital technology, Ms. Gitelman argues, has only increased the amount of bureaucratic “gray literature” that circulates outside the world of official publication, and often eludes official control.
And even as official files go digital, Mr. Kafka argues, the frustrations summed up by the word “paperwork” are hardly going away."

“There’s always this idea that if you just got the structure right, running a big organization would be easy,” he said. “Maybe that’s the grand narrative of paperwork: Why is it that no one gets it right?”

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