

Counterpoint

Total Archives Come Apart

In recent numbers of *Archivaria*, Terry Cook and Andy Birrell have exchanged shots in an unfolding battle over the concept of total archives. This discussion is an encouraging sign for those concerned with the fate of the archival profession. It opens a debate on such first principles as provenance and on the implications of current archival administrative policy. For Cook and Birrell, the issue is separation of archival material by media: in essence, whether archives should be organized in separate divisions according to their media responsibility or whether archives should consider all media together and make administrative divisions by subject area. It is important to underline that there is agreement that all media should be preserved; the question is how they should be organized once inside the confines of an archive. Administrative separation by media is now accepted orthodoxy in the archival world of Canada. Terry Cook's call for a return to the principle of provenance, and the concept of the archivist as subject specialist, evokes the atmosphere of a quaint heretical cult that media archivists would be expected to treat with disdain. As sound archivists, we nevertheless feel that Cook has raised many issues that bear serious examination for all who take the career of archivist seriously. Upon reading the Cook and Birrell articles, we found ourselves in a seemingly awkward position. While agreeing strongly with the archival value of audio-visual media, our practical experience as archivists led us to sympathize with many of the points advocated by Terry Cook, our supposed adversary. We would hope that our contribution to the debate might prevent the simplistic polarization of the debate into the "us" of the more recent audio-visual media and the "them" of the traditional textual manuscripts and records.

Perhaps the most useful way to fully comprehend the implications of administrative separation by media is to examine the basic archival functions of acquisition, conservation, and public service. At present, archivists in each media carry out the acquisition task with enthusiasm but not always, we would suggest, with common sense. Archivists sally forth with the interests of their media clasped to palpitating bosoms to find that, lo and behold, very few institutions or individuals create only sound recordings, or textual records, or photographs, or maps. Imbued with respect for the total archives concept and yet hampered by an acute sense of anxiety about any media other than their own, archivists promise potential donors that other appropriate media archivists will write or visit to assess the material outside their own area of responsibility. But, of course, the acquisition specialists from the other media may have finer fish to fry, and decide that they cannot afford the field trip, that the broadcasting photographs do not fit in with their acquisition priorities, or that the documentary record of the radio station where a valuable cache of recordings has been uncovered is not really worthy of preservation.

Relations with important donors in one media thus become hampered by the casual disinterest of archivists in another — a situation which can become distinctly embarrassing. The public is often suspicious enough about the petty-fogging bureaucrat who abides only by the rules. Archivists should do everything possible to bury the fable that bureaucrats bungle all but, unfortunately, they only fuel these apprehensions when they insist on limiting acquisition strategy to a narrow area of specialisation. We suspect that many archivists, after they experience their colleagues' lack of enthusiasms about collections which are priority for them, resolve the dilemma as we have done by accepting the photographs and scripts thrust upon us by eager donors. Yet, what do we do with them when we return to our institutions? The photographs and paper documentation may be meaningless in the context of the acquisition priorities of photograph and manuscript media divisions. Thus, the "supplementary" information becomes stranded in a sort of archival limbo; not deemed sufficiently worthy to be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven but not sufficiently damned to be condemned to the Hell of archival oblivion. The practical and immediate solution is for "supplementary" information to stay in the archives of the media initially interested in the original document — neither a happy or satisfactory solution for anybody.

The long term research implication of acquisition by medium ought to be given some thought. Researchers who wish to trace the growth and development of a particular medium may well be served by current practise but others will find themselves faced, at worst, by peculiar gaps and absences in the provenances of collections and, at best, by odd mini collections of multi-media material within large media archives. Acquisition by medium has also, and rather ironically, allowed some curious imbalances to emerge. One archivist is assigned the responsibility for all of Canadian business records whereas a substantial team of archivists document the activity of Canadian photography. Similarly, a substantial effort is delegated to Canadian broadcasting whereas no one archivist in the country is specifically assigned to Canadian journalism. The entire world of advertising is one of the most creative and influential enterprises of the twentieth century, yet it is virtually ignored as an area of archival interest though sometimes media specializations have acquired some examples of broadcasting or photographic advertising. Given the loyalty of archivists to their media, there is virtually no one left to notice or press these anomalies.

Undoubtedly it is in conservation that the real strength of separation by media lies. Presumably, media separation facilitates the conservation function of an archives. It improves the physical and intellectual control and probably secures more effectively the custody of archival holdings. The priority assigned to the conservation function was certainly the explicit, as well as the unspoken rationale, for the separation of media at the Public Archives of Canada. Even here we do have some reservations about whether conservation has always been well served by the separation of the media in the sense that there has been a development of an artefact orientation to archival documents. Information becomes secondary to the physical document itself and it is considered heretical and inexcusable not to conserve all holdings in their original pristine quality, no matter what the expense. Indisputably, media separation has enabled archives to become more technologically sophisticated but this emphasis has sometimes been to the detriment of worthy programmes which lacked the technological mystique.

As for public service needs, the division of an archival institution by media certainly serves the specialised researcher who limits his interest to one medium but it serves to discourage researchers who should be considering all media as potential source material for their work. In our own Sound Archives in Ottawa, where buildings and highways separate us physically from the principal reference areas of the Public Archives of Canada, we are often faced by the researcher who comes to us in the last half hour of his three day visit to the main building, looking to scurry away with a few nuggets to enliven his presentation. He may find to his amazement that there is a collection of recordings

in his particular area of interest. The researcher will declare his surprise at our existence, for he only learned about us by an accidental off-hand comment in another media division. He will look through our indexes and begin to tear his garments in sorrow that he had not reached us earlier. Yet, one can not entirely blame either the researcher or fellow archivists. If public service is organized by media, then no-one has the responsibility of attempting to know the total holdings of the archives and directing the researcher to the most appropriate collections, irrespective of their medium. Administrative separation by media thus contributes to the ignorance of even the most well-intentioned and conscientious archivist in one media about holdings elsewhere.

The usual reply, upheld by Birrell, to our observations about the inefficiency and confusion of current archival practice is that all of this may be more or less true. It is argued that such chaos need not be so for it is not a necessary attribute of media separation — courageous and clear-headed planning by archival administrators, more goodwill by archivists, and automated information processing should shortly mend the errors of the past. However, we fear that such confidence that these problems can be solved by equal portions of good-will, technology, and patience is not only glib but unrealistic and deceiving. With the existing administrative structure of media separation, all work is organized within the boundaries of a specific media. Any co-operation on a subject basis among various media is not only difficult, it is actively discouraged. Since there is little day-to-day interaction among the various media, any attempts to improve acquisition strategy or public service seldom survives the first attempt. Manuscript archivists talk to manuscript archivists, map archivists to map archivists, and so on. The thrust of media separation is to increase technical expertise and individual appreciation for that particular medium. Hence finding aids in each medium become more detailed, more unique, and more specialized. What impetus will there be to search for commonality among finding aids of all archival media if it is not in the interest of any of the media to do so? Automated information processing is heralded as the magic tool that will painlessly reassemble the provenance of multi-media archives. Technology can only succeed in this task if there exists a collective will to proceed in this direction and that collective will can only exist if it reflects the necessities and priorities of the administrative structure. Separation of media, it seems to us, in its pursuit of total archives, is headed inexorably in the direction of separate archives.

According to Birrell, the separation of media, should liberate archivists and historians alike from a “restrictive view of historical significance”. In reply to Cook’s suggestion that the acquisition of paintings and photographs be limited to “documentary evidence about the history of the country”, Birrell declares that the paintings of a painter, regardless of content, are *in themselves* documents of his career and, by extension, also of his country’s history. When Birrell reminds us that the borderline between art and fact can never be clear the question then arises of whether archives differ in any fundamental way from art galleries and museums. The new interpretative powers asserted by some archivists may, in effect, duplicate those of curators in art galleries and museums. We would contend that archives should resist blurring the distinctions and that the primary function of an archives is the collection and preservation of raw historical data for present and future users — to develop their own interpretations. Our claim to the support and resources of society, because we act as society’s memory, is much stronger and more stable than cultural refinements such as art galleries or museums. We would be wise not to attempt to compete with galleries or museums and risk squandering scarce public funds. The painting which has a particular value as historical documentation is collected by the archives whereas paintings which are primarily known for their aesthetic values are found in art galleries. Perhaps what is needed for archivists is not a redefinition of historical interpretation by media, but rather a redefinition of subject areas to better reflect the social reality of today’s historical record. This would be a more realistic and responsible view of the archival mandate.

Finally, we are concerned about what kinds of creatures archivists in total archives are becoming. Media specializations may reduce us to little more than archival technicians if we continue to respect our present administrative structures. Archivists, anxious to emancipate themselves from a sort of second class citizenry as semi-academics, embraced the modern affection for system solutions and technology. Admittedly, we ought to be fully aware of the technology of our particular medium. As sound archivists, we appreciate the history of sound recording technology as well as the future digital and laser disc technologies that will revolutionize our medium. Yet, that expertise in itself ought not to warrant the respect that it seems to generate. We are increasingly alarmed by, on the one hand, the excessive deference which is so often shown to the media specialist because of his technical know-how and the corresponding suspicion, on the other hand, towards the media archivist's appreciation and judgement of general archival principles. Somehow, because of daily contact with sound equipment, sound archivists have magically acquired all sorts of abilities for the archiving of sound collections and lost other skills which are considered essential in other archivists. Thus, our ability to switch on a tape recorder and thread tape can somehow enable us to appraise a collection of Finnish-language radio programmes for tax credit when none of us speaks Finnish. We are not expected to take an interest and be knowledgeable about the papers of a Quebec playwright with whom we have completed an oral history interview. Similarly, the manuscript archivist who acquired the papers of a radio dramatist would be the logical person to organize and catalogue accompanying sound recordings of interviews and radio dramas. It is a total waste of institutional energy, as well as personal knowledge and energy, to divide archival work along media lines. Archivists are regarded as sort of rarified technicians with only one string to our bow, excessively deferred to should their particular media come up and largely ignored in every other matter. They become archival castrati to be called upon only if their note is played.

The idea of "total archives" has vitalized the archival world and made archives relevant and useful to a much broader world. Canada has made a significant contribution to archival development by this broadening of the definition of archival documentation. Yet the way we are choosing to administer our total archives is causing distortions that will only become more entrenched as the term "total archives" becomes synonymous with its opposite number — "separate media archives". To date, the "total archives" debate has been carried out within the context and experience of the Public Archives of Canada, yet the resolution of the debate will be decided by archives outside the Public Archives of Canada. Our purpose is not to score debating points on archival theory but to issue a practical warning about total archives. The media solitudes that we have experienced should not be seen as an unblemished model for other archives.

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