

Counterpoint

Whither Archivy?: Some Personal Observations Addressed to those Who Would Fiddle While Rome Burns

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In his introduction to *Archivaria* 19, "Toward the Discipline of Archives," Tom Nesmith takes issue with the central premise of my essay in that same volume. Similarly, Terry Cook in his well-written and vigorously argued "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," also found in number 19, takes umbrage with my view of the crisis currently faced by the archival profession. I am pleased to have this opportunity to clarify my own position and to comment on Nesmith and Cook's ideas in so much as they run contrary to my perspective on the situation. I will leave it in Hugh Taylor's very capable hands to deal with the larger part of Cook's argument which focuses upon Taylor's marvelous essay, "Information Ecology and the Archives in the 1980s."¹

To begin, allow me to briefly summarize the arguments posed in my essay. In the first place, I would observe that the current work environment — at least in the United States — is strongly influenced by recent developments in telecommunications and electronic data processing (EDP). From the perspective of information flow and communications, many vital records exist only in an electronic form, decision-making processes are obscured by undocumented oral transactions, the rate of technological change has resulted in a profusion of information storage and delivery systems and services, and the overall volume of data (in all media) is growing at a staggering, geometrical rate.

* Author's note: The General Editor of *Archivaria*, Tom Nesmith, has generously invited me to comment upon both his introduction and Terry Cook's article from *Archivaria* 19. Due to publishing schedules, I was obliged to work from typescript copies of these two essays as well as a manuscript version of my own contribution to *Archivaria* 19, "Automated Information Management: Is There A Role for the Archivist in the Office of the Future?" I would like to acknowledge the assistance of my colleague, David E. Horn, in reviewing my text for errors of fact or tact, but I alone am responsible for what follows.

1 See *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), pp. 25-37.

While these developments in and of themselves carry with them significant implications for archivists, office technologies and information services have also created a body of more sophisticated users who possess a high level of expectation regarding the timely and appropriate delivery of such services. Taken together, the glut of information and the demand for better, more refined access pose problems for archivists, many of whom are ignorant of these developments or, if informed, are in no position to respond effectively to the challenges that confront them.

The substantive centre of my essay focuses upon examples of how the use of electronic data processing and telecommunications systems in the work place complicate such fundamental archival practices as the establishment of provenance, appraisal, information retrieval, and the preservation of records. Furthermore, I emphasize the “political” implications of the archivist’s failure to address the problems imposed by the new technologies and the pressures wrought by the user community. If archivists do not lead the way, or indeed, even acknowledge the need for their participation in the changing information management environment, their users will seek assistance elsewhere. As a corollary to this circumstance, parent organizations will bypass their archives (or worse refuse to create them in the first place) and establish other bodies to serve their needs. At the very least our patrons will significantly reduce support for the archives function, directing resources elsewhere within the organization.

While I do not paint a rosy picture of the situation, I do not mean to suggest that the archivist has no role to play in the new information environment. Far from it! I observe that “the archivist is in the position of being the least prepared but potentially the best qualified to address the many complex questions” posed by the aforementioned circumstances. (p. 169) In explaining this statement, I argue:

Through training and disposition, the archivist naturally takes a long-term view towards the value (i.e., utility) of information. He is sensitive to the dynamics of bureaucratic structures, administrative procedures set in a historical context, and the needs of researchers. The professional archivist also maintains a level of objectivity in the appraisal of documentary evidence, facilitated to a certain extent by the intellectual distance from the original records and their creators. (p. 170)

Thus, I base my optimistic view of the archivist’s potential role in the management of the new information environment not on his ability to re-tool, but rather upon those elements of training, perspective, and professional sense that have served us so nobly in the past.

However, in concluding my essay for *Archivaria* 19, I also contend that archivists must not rely entirely upon their heritage. They must broaden the base of their knowledge in and experience with the new technologies. In addition, they should get involved — at least from the standpoint of an observer — in the full life cycle of documents (especially EDP records). Finally, they ought to build permanent bridges with other professions within the information management community with a view towards rendering a more comprehensive and satisfactory service to end users. I do not make these recommendations because I believe that archivists have outlived their usefulness. My fear is that if we neglect the areas mentioned here, we will ultimately fail in fulfilling our traditional, fundamental responsibilities as archivists. Because I have a deep personal commitment to our mission, as do Nesmith and Cook, I view it as my duty to speak out against what I consider a neglectful disregard of the archivist’s professional development.

In summary, the changes that I see in the work place require a vigorous and imaginative response from those of us responsible for maintaining the systems that manage this information. The sheer volume of the record, its existence in a magnetic medium, the rapidity of technological change, and the increasing pressure from end users and parent organizations to provide more responsive services all militate against the easy achievement of the professional obligations of the archivist. If the historian-archivist is best suited to deal with these challenges, he must take a broader view in defining his role. If we delegate these responsibilities to others, such as records managers and librarians, will we not at the same time transfer to them the most creative, interesting, and challenging of our tasks?

In turning to the comments of Nesmith and Cook, I am struck on the one hand by the manner in which they have misinterpreted my arguments, and on the other by the naïveté and myopia of their vision. For example, Nesmith claims that I “believe the most important item on the archival agenda is the challenge of mastering ... contemporary administrative documentation” as (by implication) an end in itself. My emphasis on the need to learn the new technologies and how they influence the creation of contemporary records is in fact grounded in my commitment to the traditional values of the archivist and my view that a failure to come to grips with EDP-generated documents will ultimately result in the mismanagement and ultimately the loss of some of the evidentially and informationally important records of our age. For his part, Nesmith is confusing means with ends. He and I embrace the same professional and cultural objectives, but I would argue that the failure of our profession to expand upon our warehouse of tools and techniques will ultimately lead to a frustration of ends.

Nesmith next does me two disservices. In the first place, he shortchanges his summary of my essay while repeatedly quoting Cook’s criticisms, thus adding his own tacit support to Cook’s unsubstantiated views. I recognize that as an individual Nesmith is on the other side of this debate, but as an editor he ought to take a more impartial stance in his introduction.

Secondly, Nesmith draws at least one significant quote of mine out of context, suggesting that I view the labours of an archivist as fulfilling an “antiquarian curatorial role.” Those who know my work surely recognize that I have the utmost respect for our professional heritage and that my writings have attempted to place the traditional practices of archivists within the context of the new information environment. My own statement makes this quite clear:

If we do not change the way we view the purpose and nature of our performance within our parent organizations, I expect that before too long we will be relegated to the antiquarian curatorial role that we have heretofore rejected as a misplaced ‘popular’ notion of what an archivist does for society. (p. 163)

In making the reference to “antiquarians,” I am speaking of the *de facto* view of some end users. More importantly, I am quite anxious about this label being applied with some credibility to archivists who are unable to deal with contemporary electronic documents. The “shunt” I fear is that of our users bypassing us for those who can properly appraise, schedule, and service records generated *via* the new telecommunications and electronic data processing technologies.

In concluding his introduction, Nesmith observes that “there is no satisfactory reason for archivists to design or manage records not yet in archives for contemporary administrative purposes or to locate and interpret them for policy makers.” My disagreement with this statement is two-fold. In the first place, if archivists do not involve themselves earlier on in the life cycle of electronic documents, they will find that these records will never come to them in any shape or form for archival purposes. The simple fact is this. An electronic-based document is easily written over and, indeed, most EDP systems facilitate the editing and ultimately the elimination of administrative documents once they have served their immediate purpose. In such a setting, it would be the archivist’s role to sensitize the creator of the document to the archival process and the importance of close coordination prior to the erasure of magnetic media. To leave such a responsibility in the hands of records managers is in my view a mistake because the mandate of the records manager is towards economy, efficiency, and the clearing of electronic storage space. Only the archivist is charged with the long-term maintenance of files beyond their evidential life as dictated by business needs and legal requirements.

My second disagreement with Nesmith’s observation concerns his apparent objection to working with the creators of the record (i.e., the “policy makers”). In the first place, when I refer to the work place, I am referring to *any* work place or office. Archives (or at least the need for them) exist outside the government as well as in it — though this appears to be a concept that some of my colleagues who labour within large government archives, such as PAC and NARA, have difficulty accepting. The creator of the document in an electronic environment may indeed be a policy maker, but to me he is important as an end user of my services. It is my job to assist such a person to understand the nature of office documentation, its potential long-term value to them and others, and how their work fits into it. There is no harm in this; indeed, it is essential from a political point of view if we are to retain the support of our parent organizations.

Furthermore, as John McDonald clearly indicates in his “Interim Report of the PAC/DOC Information Management Working Group,” the creator in an automated office work environment — even in government(!) — must eventually come to serve as the assistant to the archivist. As his Task Force’s report clearly indicated, the electronic offices within future Canadian governments will involve a close coordination of efforts between those who create documents, their senior management, and the PAC. This interchange and mutual support is essential for the survival of the archival process as traditionally defined. If we as archivists do not participate, the records of today will not survive for the users of the future. We cannot look to the nineteenth century for an analogous situation. There is no precedent for dealing with EDP records. We must forge new techniques and seek fresh approaches.

In his substantial essay, Terry Cook expands in detail upon many of the same themes raised by Tom Nesmith in his introduction. Like Nesmith, Cook campaigns for the need to preserve the historian-archivist nexus. I totally agree with this position and am furthermore entirely sympathetic with his views regarding the need for a broader theoretical base to archivy. Where I differ with Cook is in his assumptions that first, somehow one cannot be both an historian-archivist and someone conversant with the new information technologies and practices; secondly, only large “independent” archives can fulfil the “true” mission of the profession; and thirdly, EDP records do not pose an unusual or particularly difficult challenge for archivists. In the space remaining to me, I would like to address each of these issues in turn.

To begin with, I will concede that it is not necessary that all archivists live in both worlds — that of paper on the one hand and machine-readable records on the other. However, I will insist that it is essential for the administrators of programmes who maintain these media to be conversant in all relevant technologies. Certainly those who work in EDP record repositories must master those technologies inherent in the media they are obliged to manage and service. Having said all of this and having indicated earlier on in this essay the need for the archivist to build these new skills upon the bedrock of traditional historical/archival training, I fail to see how the issues I have raised are “an irrelevant side-tracking of archival endeavour.”

Assuming that Cook shares my view that the fundamental role of the archivist is to identify, collect, preserve, and service records of long-term evidential and informational value, I cannot see how archivists can fulfill this obligation in an automated office environment unless they are proactive. It is not enough for the archivist to await the arrival of the electronic record, for these documents will never arrive or, if they do, they will in all likelihood lack the requisite supporting materials (i.e., documentation) to be of use unless the archivist works with the creator in identifying files for preservation. The special requirements of EDP records (a subject that I will address again below) necessitate involvement at an early stage to ensure sufficient documentation and system compatibility for servicing in the archives once deposited there.

Cook would have us believe that the records manager will do all of this good work for us and that somehow it is inappropriate for us to labour in this fashion. As I have already stated, the records manager may be coping with the “huge amounts of increasing complex records of contemporary administration,” but the orientation is quite different from that of the historian-archivist. Records managers are not in a position nor are they by training and disposition so inclined as to examine records — in any media — as archivists might examine them. However, the sheer bulk of EDP records, the reusable nature of the media, and the rapid rate of technological change strongly suggest that those magnetic files that ought eventually to reside in the archives will never reach that final resting place without the direct intervention of the archivist in the life cycle process. In my view, the archivist’s participation in this manner is, albeit poorly defined, honourable and necessary.

Cook apparently views my interpretation of this situation as one that

stresses short-term administrative uses for records or information rather than our ‘traditional’ long-term cultural analysis of them, that places archivists in captive, in-house dependency rather than independent, professional association, that sees the ‘management’ of records and information as more important than their scholarly ‘study,’ and that emphasizes training in technology and procedures rather than an historical understanding of records.... (p. 48)

While I must confess that I do support greater involvement of the archivist in day-to-day information management, I do so because I believe it is one of the best ways to become more educated in the new telecommunications and EDP technologies. Furthermore, I would argue that it provides an opportunity to market archival services more effectively to the end user and at the same time to develop a better understanding as to the documentary output of the agency. These practices will also assist archivists in generating recognition and therefore financial support for their programmes. Thus, these practices by no means dilute the archivist’s task or purpose. As information managers in the true

sense of that title, they must sift through today's records, preserve those that merit such treatment, and direct the end user to the appropriate data. In this manner, they will serve "knowledge" and contribute to humanity in the fashion envisioned by Cook.

In moving next to Cook's position that only large, "independent" archives can do a proper job, I must say that I take strong exception to his view. As an historian of British Imperial and Commonwealth history, it has been my pleasure to labour in both the United Kingdom's Public Record Office and the Public Archives of Canada. Given their size and the scope of their responsibilities, one must applaud the breadth of their accomplishment. I am nevertheless befuddled by Cook's view of the desirability of these types of agencies to the exclusion of smaller, less comprehensive repositories. Perhaps the space that he devotes to this subject in his essay is in response to what he perceives to be Hugh Taylor's criticism of centralized archival programmes. He is nevertheless naïve to think that NARA and PAC are more "independent" (by which I assume he means free from outside interference and control) than smaller programmes located in universities and colleges or within private corporations.

Whatever may be his motives, he is certainly mistaken to suggest that I have "accepted the false corollary that in order to cope with the new, archivists must throw over the old, that to maintain archives in the age of the information revolution, the old notions of 'historical' archives no longer work." (p. 35) This statement is nonsense. What I want to see are archival programmes breaking away from the notion that nothing has changed and that the users of archives twenty years from now are going to have the same requirements as users today. By failing to address the issues raised by the "information revolution," archivists may in the future find themselves bereft of the records of *our* age. The myopia of Cook's perspective can ultimately result in the loss of our documentary heritage (as cold and impersonal as those EDP "fonds" may be!). Thus, I am not advocating a "redefinition" of the archivist and his role, but rather calling for the archivist to recognize the changes going on around him and to adapt accordingly.

I share Cook's concern for the preservation of the archivist's objectivity *vis-à-vis* the record, but I fail to see how the presence of an archival unit within a large organization substantially reduces the chances for such objectivity. In the first place, most archives reside within some larger parent institution that generates the records housed by that archives. This is unlikely to change nor is that such a bad thing. One can cite institutional abuses at NARA and PAC just as easily as one can ferret these out in the archives of IBM, General Motors, and the Central Intelligence Agency. Indeed, the volume of records generated by these agencies makes deliberate, selective destruction most difficult. It is equally problematic for the conscientious archivist to sort through all the duplication and refuse in search of that elusive residue of valuable historical records. If we are to ensure the objectivity of our archives, our focus should not be on the nature of the specific institution, but rather upon the quality of training and professional commitment embodied by those who staff these organizations. The historian-archivist as envisioned by Cook would undoubtedly fit the bill. I would only add that this person should give as much attention to the records of our day as to those of past generations.

And what of the records of our day? Cook rightly points out that archivists have readily adapted to such new media as microfilm, audio recordings, and video tape without any problems. Why should magnetic media pose a more difficult challenge necessitating a different approach to our work? There are many arguments I might raise in response to

this misinformed observation. In the first place, most non-print media found in archives and for that matter in the average work place today — with the exception of EDP media — are standardized. Thus, a single microfiche reader and a single microfilm reader can provide access to any format of micrographic image that one might use in one's research. Similarly there are only a few variations in both audio and video recording formats. The archives servicing these types of records must therefore maintain only a limited number of machines and the staff to operate them. The same may not be said for EDP records which currently require a vast array of equipment, operating systems, storage media, and administrative expertise to service properly.

This state of affairs raises significant questions for archivists. Should we maintain prohibitively expensive computer museums to service EDP records? Should we convert them all to paper or micrographic formats for preservation? Should we involve ourselves in the international efforts to standardize EDP storage formats as has already been done with video media? Even if standardization is achieved in the foreseeable future, do we have the trained staff and financial resources to service these records when they come under our aegis? The time has come for archivists to take a concerted approach to the management of EDP records and to prepare for the day when they become a significant component of our holdings.

Another aspect of EDP files ignored by Cook in his analogy with audio and video records is that the latter types of media come to us *in their final form*. More often than not, EDP records come to us as unprocessed, raw data. You can look at a video or listen to an audio tape with little difficulty, but most EDP records require significant supporting materials before they can be accessed. Even then, archivists must take a larger role in their research use than they would be obliged to do with other media. The researcher will often require the archivist to "process" the EDP file in a particular manner for his needs. Unlike with paper records, this type of processing is not a one-time operation but will vary from one end user to the next. As a result the historian-archivist of EDP files will play a much more integral role in the research process than has been the case up to now. To say that this will place no unique and difficult burden on archival services is to mislead the uninitiated.

If in the course of this counterpoint, I have been rather hard on Nesmith and Cook, it is not because I differ with their commitment to developing sound archival theory or preserving the historian-archivist. Rather, it is my intent to dispel the illusion that the nature of the archival craft will carry on into the twenty-first century as it did in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. The values and traditions articulated by Nesmith and Cook must be preserved, but not to the exclusion of the new responsibilities confronting archivists in the information age. Let us all recognize our common heritage, develop and refine our discipline, and go forth with new energy and vision to assist those through the seas of information now engulfing us.