

Is There a Future in the Use of Archives?

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Archives, like deposits that archaeologists dig up, are documentary remains of the past pulled together and preserved for use in the future. The most important use of archives is that made by future generations of historians, men and women yet unborn, who, but for the endeavour of archivists, would have no sources from which to work. This is the unmistakable message that archivists of the 1980s are sending out to everyone who will pay attention. Listen to us. "Archivists serve not only contemporary (often transient) needs but also the possible needs of the researchers in the far-distant future," one colleague wrote me proudly a couple of years ago, echoing the sentiment of many. "The archivist who is proudest of his 'image' thinks of those users along with those of the present." Consider the mottos we use: "Preserving the Past to Enrich the Future," "Securing the Future Through Preserving the Past," "Preserving Today's Records for Tomorrow's Use," and "There is a future history to which every state, and every citizen of every state, at this hour, and every hour is contributing materials."

A message repeated often enough, in enough forums, is heard. Resource allocators, those persons to whom archivists report in their organizational hierarchies, have heard it. The researcher who recently surveyed the attitudes of resource allocators toward archivists and archival work reported their firm belief that "A central value of archives is that they are a permanent collection making it possible for future generations to learn and benefit from them."¹ A student in a history class I taught some years ago heard, too, and wrote on a test the following short answer explanation of archives: "Archives are places where records of the past are kept for reference in the future, if necessary."

Where does this notion that archives are for use in the future originate? We can trace it back at least one generation. No less an authority than English archival theorist Sir Hilary Jenkinson linked use in the future with the definition of the term "archives." At the beginning of his monumental *Manual of Archive Administration*, in answering the

* An earlier version of this paper was presented as the keynote address at the Association of Canadian Archivists Annual Conference in June 1986.

1 Social Research Inc., *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions* (Study #722/01) (December 1984), p. 5.

question “What are Archives?”, Sir Hilary set his argument in terms of what “The Historian of the future...” will want.²

It makes sense that archivists would have developed the notion. We preserve records generated in the past so that they may be used after the creator or office of origin no longer has contemporary need of them. It is easy to extend the concept that since we have preserved the records for use at a time after their creation, we preserve them for a use in a future beyond our time. American archival theorizer and popularizer Margaret Cross Norton accepted that. Archivists by their sense of history, she wrote, recognize that documents have two uses, “their present day legalistic use, and their potential historical value. [The archivist’s] experience teaches him that some records which seem very unimportant now will be priceless later on....”³ Thus we have come to believe that our most noble service to humanity is to provide a legacy of records from present and former times for use by posterity, by persons who by the fact of chronology cannot provide for themselves as well as we can for them.

In embracing this belief, archivists have extended too far the concept of use at a later time. Unwittingly we have staked our own future on what we hope will happen in someone else’s future. The problem is not that the notion is untrue or unworthy, but rather that in exalting it as heartily as we do, we compromise our ability to achieve it. Americans and Canadians, nurtured by a similar me-first, frontier tradition, are people more concerned about their present, about the here-and-now, than about their future. The attitudes and actions of our politicians mirror those of their fellow citizens. Lawmakers, when they have a surplus in the treasury, set aside little for future needs and contingencies beyond the next budget period. The State of Texas, in a severe economic slump because the years of surplus revenue from oil taxes have ended, is only the latest example that when legislators have extra, they cheerfully spend all within reach, preferring to let the future take care of itself. Providing for the future, and especially for research because research is a good thing, is not a high priority expense for budget planners. By pointing to use in the future as the greatest product of their work, archivists are talking themselves into a hole, not out of one.

Furthermore, in emphasizing preservation for use in the future, we have developed the concept of permanent value, the concept that the materials we preserve have a value for all time. We stress the legitimate humanist arguments supporting, justifying, and explaining our work by reminding people that to prepare for the future, we must understand the past. The materials we gather, preserve, and make available to the users of archives make it possible for succeeding generations to discover their roots and their place in time. There is a fateful paradox in the concept of permanent value, however, which is that nothing is permanent. People and society acknowledge no absolute, no permanent, value. The interests, aspirations, foundations, and values of society are forever shifting, forever developing, forever changing.

Is it possible, or even desirable, then, to try to preserve information in records for use in the void of the distant future?⁴ Humans long have thought so, but no earlier civilization

2 Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd. ed. (London, 1966), p. 3.

3 Thornton W. Mitchell, *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival & Records Management* (Carbondale, 1975), pp. 4, 9.

4 David Bearman first asked this question in a paper titled “Recorded Memory and Cultural Continuity,” presented at the Texas Library Association Annual Meeting on 10 April 1986, in Fort Worth. I have drawn significantly from Bearman’s insight.

has succeeded in the effort. Human languages and human cultures have been too fragile to support communications across time distances of thousands of years. We in 1987 are no more capable of it than were our ancestors. The interdisciplinary body assembled by the United States Department of Energy to develop a means to warn persons 10,000 years in the future of the presence of buried radioactive material raised more questions than it answered about our ability to achieve such communication.

If archivists listen to their own rhetoric, they hear that they are not even confident of their ability to serve the future. "The fact that a document may not have been consulted for a century does not rule out the possibility of the fact that tomorrow some attorney may attach great significance to it," Margaret Norton has written. The fact, indeed, is valid. But it is lost in the hypothetical context because, obviously, presented as she presented it, the exact opposite — that no significance may attach to the long-unconsulted document — is equally likely.

The case that the use of archives (both in the present and in the future) is vitally and broadly important has to be made to our contemporaries. Through appreciation of the use of records from former times in solving the problems of our age, we can both contribute a service now and make a case for preservation of records for use in the future. Contemporaries must find value for themselves in the use of archives, or we risk their supposing the opposite, a calamity we archivists cannot even comprehend. And never have we been closer to just such a calamity than we are at this very moment. The advent of the computer has placed in the hands of the creator of the contemporary record the ability to dispose of that record without a trace. The implications are frightening. "The United States is in danger of losing its memory," the 1985 *Report of the Committee on the Records of Government* begins ominously.⁵ We, as archivists, and also as historians and concerned citizens, have no time to waste in making the case that the use of archives is vitally and broadly important to the contemporary world.

The fact is clear and well substantiated in another report issued in 1985 titled "The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions," but better known, after the name of its author, as the Levy Report. The Council of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 1984 commissioned Professor Sidney J. Levy, Chair of the Marketing Department of the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University, to study the attitudes and perceptions toward archivists and archival work of resource allocators: those persons above archivists in the organizational hierarchy who wield the power of the purse, the power to allocate or withhold resources from the archives department. The Levy Report grew out of the work of the SAA's Task Force on Archives and Society to study and recommend ways and means that archivists can employ to reverse those elements in the popular image of us and our work that dispose resource allocators to apportion to us inadequate resources to accomplish the vital work that we do.

Professor Levy learned that resource allocators see archivists as technicians, competent, dedicated, professional, to be sure, but technicians nonetheless. We have been stereotyped by them as persons of impotent virtue, due in substantial part to the image we present of ourselves. "They are scholars, but there is a lot of variety among archivists. They may be a retiring personality. They may like to work alone and like detail work," commented one

⁵ *Committee on the Records of Government: Report* (Washington, 1985), p. 1.

resource allocator. Another added that “Archivists are project-oriented people. They love to take a mess and make some order of it.” “Archivists that I’ve known,” remarked a third, “are just as varied as anyone else. Some are a lot like librarians, quiet and mousy.” Obviously, to resource allocators, the single most important group to us, we exhibit no present dynamism and seem unresponsive to people of the present, beyond those who appear in our archives.

The attitudes Levy documented match those found in the popular press. The most recent example is an article in the 1 April 1986 issue (and it is no April Fool’s joke) of *American Way*, the in-flight magazine of American Airlines, about an employee of the declassification program of the National Archives of the United States, which carried the title: “The Sultan of Secrets.” The piece, while favorable to the work, reeks of stereotypes of archivists. “Sultan” John Taylor is presented as mild-mannered and white-haired, a sleuth with the the manner of a schoolteacher, and a benign ferret. He works among endless rows of faded cardboard boxes “in a most unprepossessing setting: a cramped, windowless room with faded green walls and long desks.”⁶

Would you go to the stereotypical archivist: a person absorbed in detail, cloistered in a close, drab environment, quiet and mousy, for opinion or assistance on anything but the activity of the specific department over which the person presides? Resource allocators do not. Said one, speaking for all: “The archivist plays an important role in our institution because of their [sic] uniqueness and their handling of the one-of-a-kind material. I can’t say that the archivist influences our organizational policy in any way. That’s just not part of their function.” In the minds of resource allocators, archivists would not be pleased with such a role anyway. Archivists, resource allocators believe, find their fulfillment in helping researchers succeed at their work. “The opportunity to do a professional job well” is the main reward, according to one resource allocator. “They are never going to make a lot of money, so their rewards are in the satisfaction of a job well done.” A resource allocator in government expressed his opinion that “They are rewarded when information from their holdings gets published. The fact that a book comes out and they have helped the author to get the research done and they may see that they get their name printed as having helped the author. It’s like they are deserving of a medal.” Given that condescension, it should surprise no one to learn further that resource allocators consider archival positions to be no-growth, dead-end positions for which salaries always will be low.

After reviewing all the data, Professor Levy saw clearly that “Traditional stereotypes that linger on even among more knowledgeable resource allocators need to be counteracted.” From his perspective as a market analyst, Levy offered concrete direction. He wrote: “Making archives a more common and accessible concept, and doing more to open them to use and visiting, should diminish the various elements of dustiness and mustiness, sheer acquisitiveness, territoriality, and dead accumulation. In sum, archivists have an identity that is a compound of specific abilities and attractions, somewhat vaguely conceptualized in the minds of others and burdened by unexciting stereotypical elements. To improve their situation, archivists need to define more coherent identity objectives, and communicate greater freshness and distinctiveness in imagery by their training, programs, self-assertion, publicity, advertising, and relevance to modern life.” That last sentence says it all: unless we make clear, through the way we define ourselves, conduct ourselves, speak of ourselves, and organize our work, unless we make clear in

6 Edward Wakin, “The Sultan of Secrets,” *American Way*, (1 April 1986), p. 49.

every way possible to our administrators in particular and the public in general that archival enterprise serves them in meeting their present needs, we archivists are doomed forever to be serving a future that never comes, doomed forever to labour at a job that receives warm lip service and scanty resources.

The good news, and there is good news, is that working to be, and to appear to be, relevant to the present should not be as difficult as it could be, because of one other interesting fact Professor Levy discovered. Resource allocators are generally more knowledgeable of the kind of work that takes place in archives and value the archival service to a higher degree than many of us anticipated. Being unrivalled in our field, then, and enjoying status as respected professionals, we occupy a position and platform from which to begin the work of seeking change in the image and position of archivists, and thereby enhancing our ability to carry out the vital work that we do.

We can begin at many points, but I suggest that one of the most important is with our definition of the material at the core of our work: archives. "Archives," according to the glossary prepared twelve years ago by our professional colleagues, adopted by the SAA, and published in the *American Archivist* in 1974, are "the noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved because of their continuing value."⁷

Defining archives as noncurrent records puts the emphasis for distinguishing them from any other records on their chronological age. Is that where archivists want it? Is not "their continuing value" — that is, the value of the information they contain — the more important facet of the definition? Archivists with whom I have talked have been uniformly quick to observe that there is no arbitrary line we, or anyone else, can draw in the sands of time on the older side of which you have archives and on the younger side of which you do not. Archives, I submit, are records that contain information of enduring value, records which, when they are moved into an archival repository, normally have fulfilled the contemporary use for which they were created. If the value of the information they hold is the critical measure, then records that contain such information have an archival quality from the moment of their creation and throughout their use as current records by their creator or office of origin. This, in turn, means that records can be simultaneously current office records and archival records. Thus, our definition must simultaneously convey that records of continuing value have an archival quality because of the information they contain, and that, at the same time, an archival programme for their preservation and use is essential if they are to be fully utilized as "archives." In practical terms, the separation between archivists and records managers needs to be bridged. We have far more in common than either profession has admitted.

If those records in current use that have continuing value do possess an archival character, then the archivist needs to work with the office of creation and the records manager in scheduling them and taking those steps necessary to ensure that the records come to the archives after their usefulness in the office has been served. This means that the archivist, where the opportunity presents itself, cannot wait to work with the records until they have lost their primary-present-meaning to the creator and office of origin. Let the office continue to both see us only after the records have lost their usefulness and hear us talking only about Jenkinson's "historian of the future," and archivists forfeit their relevance to the office, just as Professor Levy said. The product of the historian of the

7 Frank B. Evans *et al.*, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist* 37 (1974), p. 417.

future, if it ever exists, is of no use to the present, the world in which the budget planner lives.

These realizations force us, more basically yet, to rethink the archivist's role in and service to society. Society values its heritage much less than access to information for solving everyday problems. David Bearman, that archival sage, has expressed it well.

Society generates a record of its activity to serve distinct social ends; as tools for the design of the next building or machine they are applicable knowledge; to assure the rights of its members or as sample excretions of the activity itself, the record serves accountability; to train its youth, the communication of the record is contained in its cultural form. As intermediaries in the process of delivering these message-bearing remains [archivists] are the sub-contractors of engineers and planners, lawyers and social workers, teachers and journalists. To claim a social role, to demand our share of resources, we point not to the needs of the indeterminate future and the nostalgia of the unappreciated past, but to the immediate requirements of today. These are the requirements for accountability, for applicable knowledge, and for cultural connectivity.... The challenge is to make sense of the documentation — not to keep it, to deliver it where it is needed, not to store it.⁸

Thus we need to design systems for retrieval of data that provide access from a variety of perspectives and allow users the ability to get into the data. This calls for active involvement by all of us, for outreach programs that go beyond merely accepting users to actively demanding their involvement. It makes us realize that, in Bearman's dramatic words: "Instead of envisioning ourselves as victims of an information explosion, we need to emphasize our vision of archives as the prism for an information implosion."

Clearly, then, the most important job that we have at present is changing the image of the archivist and archival work. To do it, we first must understand clearly our role in and service to society. We work for the present generation. The greatest use we can promote is that by our contemporaries. They do not understand it; we have told them otherwise for too long. Not even friends clearly understand it. The American Committee on the Records of Government lamely observes, under the heading "Importance of Leadership," that "Though we are certain that existing recordkeeping systems in individual offices involve little or no planning with regard to future use, we cannot tell whether or not this affects adversely the actual operations of government."⁹ The choice of file systems for contemporary records indeed may have little effect on the contemporary use of those records, but archivists know too many horror stories of failures caused by information in archives being ignored to think otherwise. It does have an effect. Agreed among ourselves, then, that present use is vitally important, we must focus unrelentingly in our collecting campaigns, in our reference work, and in meetings with administrators above us in the organizational hierarchies on redefining the archival service and redrawing the image of archivists and archival endeavour.

The work will be long and tedious. We can succeed only if each of us contributes. But it can be done. We need to produce more fliers like that issued by the SAA late last year asking the engaging question: "Who's the 'I' in Archives?" Published for distribution to a

8 Bearman, "Recorded Memory and Cultural Continuity."

9 *Committee on the Records of Government: Report*, p. 36.

general audience, it makes archives important to the average individual. We need more publications like Proctor and Gamble's *Perspectives on History*. Individual packets in this series designed for use in secondary schools provide background on a tumultuous period of history, such as World War I or the Depression, include selected documents showing how the company met the challenges of the time, and ask the students to put themselves into the scene and consider whether they would have responded to that real-life situation as the company did. Archives are made immediately useful by being made part of the process of learning and understanding, rather than being treated as objects of veneration of little practical application. We need to take advantage of every media and every opportunity to drive home the point that archives are useful in concrete ways to the public, as individuals and in groups, everyday. In Texas, the tax burden on every citizen is less than it otherwise would be because Texas owns title, and thereby mineral rights, to the tidelands offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. The court case that returned ownership from the United States to Texas was based exclusively on the state's records of successive boundary claims since the Spanish first landed more than 450 years ago. In New York State, study of records located a lost toxic waste dump in time to prevent residential development on the site. In Kentucky, academic researchers used medical records to create histories of diseases as one vital step on the road to control, and hopefully elimination, of the maladies. In Manitoba, marine researchers used ships' logs from the Hudson's Bay Company Records to understand currents and ice flows, and thereby to improve the odds for successful shipping in northern waters. All archivists can cite examples pertinent to their locality. They should use them.

Is there a future in the use of archives? Absolutely. But that future is use in the ongoing present for solving problems of the ongoing present. The greatest service of archivists is contributing to the continuity of culture by stimulating connections between the useful information from the past and the challenging needs of the present. We do not keep "old," meaning outdated, records. Rather, we maintain records from a former present which contain vintage information, timely and exciting to the user who connects it to the present in which he or she labours. We should acknowledge the real future in the use of archives by adopting a motto such as: "Archives: Records from the Past Working for the Present."