

What are the Clients? Who are the Products? The Future of Archival Public Services in Perspective

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Archivists are guided by a simple statement of their mission. When asked what it is that they do, archivists invariably reply that they acquire, preserve and make available records of enduring value. But this statement is deceptively simple. The functions which arise from that mission are complex, and the proper blend of ingredients is not a recipe on which there is universal agreement within the archival community. How do we balance what is essentially an odd-number equation without developing a lopsided tilt? Discussions of the ways and means of integrating the three functions into a balanced whole has spawned a considerable literature, particularly since 1970, which is catholic in its coverage, examining both basic operations and philosophical fundamentals. Such insistent questioning of all aspects of archival administration might be seen by some as a symptom of our general professional malaise, and frustration with the limitations imposed by techniques received from the past which now seem to serve us so poorly. However, debate and discussion about the style and substance of our enterprise in the future is more correctly a sign of vigour and health. "Facing Up, Facing Out: Reference, Access and Public Programming," the theme chosen for the 1990 Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, sums up both the candour and the creativity which is the hallmark of archival debate.

The title and theme suggest that the focus of the recent intensification of professional concern in the whole area is archival public services, and specifically the programmes offered to users. The general boom in cultural institutions, and the widening of public interest beyond what was the customary clientele, has provided the groundswell for this new wave of archival interest in their clients. In addition, a bright spotlight has been cast on archives by freedom of information and protection of privacy legislation, which has profound implications for access to archival records. Four of the papers presented at the conference focus on the third part of the archivist's credo by considering the implications of "availability," and related public services for archives in the future. Although each author has a different vantage point, collectively their papers represent well our professional responsiveness to change in the social environment of archives, and our keen awareness of the much altered needs and hopes of a newly variegated clientele.

Gabrielle Blais and David Enns, Tim Ericson and Ian Wilson are all proponents of the idea that aggressive public programmes must be the driving force of client-centred

archives. Blais and Enns have a mission to “rescue” public programming from the “periphery of the archival tradition,” particularly by integrating public programmes into acquisition decisions, descriptive priorities and interpretive duties. They provide a coherent framework in which to conduct this integration. Their arguments are clear and cogent, proceeding from the firm conviction that use provides the ultimate justification for archives. This imperative thrusts the archivist into the role of a communicator of information rather than a keeper of records. Ericson’s provocative contribution reinforces the concept of a user-centred focus for all archival work. He moves beyond the functional and managerial analysis of Blais and Enns to probe the mind-set of archivists. Ericson suggests that in the future we must reverse our customary trinity to emphasize use, always and ultimately, as the purpose of acquisition and preservation. Wilson, too, is uneasy with the sequential conceptualization of archival work, which mimics the chronology of acquisition, preservation and only then, use.

Blais and Enns, and Ericson, urge archivists to devote more attention to planning. They argue that archives must target the various publics to be served by new programmes, which themselves must be developed in full partnership with all other core archival functions. Clearly, managerial virtuosity is a desideratum for integrating wide public use of archives into each institution’s role in society. These archivists are convinced that the traditional linear exposition of the archives mission confuses means with ends; custodial skills and responsibilities are emphasized, and protection precedes availability. In this scenario, use becomes almost a casual by-product of other processes. Access is a narrow window in which use is reduced to discrete one-to-one encounters with individual documents. The reality of single-use encounters is in conflict with the future imperative of broad public access.

Ian Wilson concentrates less on the diagnosis of the present ills of current archival public programming. Rather he directs us to a futuristic vision of “high-tech” archives where equal access for all is implemented through computers, satellites, and high-speed copying. Wilson urges us to explore the relationship of archives to society. For Wilson, public access is a democratic right, and technology will eventually assist in providing genuine open access to archives for all citizens. Archives, thus liberated from the thrall of one-to-one encounters, will become a new cultural growth industry tapping what Ericson calls the strong latent interest in all of us for the curiosities of the past.

All of our authors perceive that archives are marginalized at present, whereas they should be integrated into popular cultural life and education. The interface between society and archives is only provided by public programmes, which, more often than not, are perceived as luxuries in archives services, a frill which is nice but not necessary. Ericson argues that, rather than offering what is often perceived by users as a confusing smorgasbord of “means,” we should be offering a balanced menu of solutions. Wilson has a similar view, drawing our attention to the structured encounters which museums provide for their clients. But are archives not now more popular than ever? Are we not experiencing a rise in demand from an ever-growing genealogical clientele? According to Wilson, our recent meteoric rise in popularity among genealogists is less a sign of growth in popularity and relevance and more an indication of our increasing marginalization in modern society. Do we cling to outmoded myths of custodial responsibilities and scholarly use because we are above the blandishments of popularity, or is it that we fear to reveal our weaknesses in selecting material, as Ericson suggests? Have we preserved records of enduring value, or have we kept what is increasingly irrelevant to society? Is

our vision clouded? Is it wrong? Does it have any meaning in an era of information glut, when data communication and data interchange are activities undertaken for their own sake?

Terry Cook suggests that archivists and their institutions should carefully weigh up the costs of converting to a cultural industry. The archivist as cultural technocrat and the archives as a heritage supermarket are not ends in themselves, but trends in style to be examined warily. Cook is in full agreement with the basic premise of the Blais and Enns, Ericson and Wilson arguments: that access is imperative, and that the public services and programming to provide access are a core archival function which needs to be fully integrated into all the other activities traditionally seen as more important. Yet Cook is uneasy with the exclusive concentration on access and public service, partly because the arguments are conducted in the language of consumerism borrowed from the business world; and partly because he fears that the unique character of archives will be glossed over, perhaps even lost, in joining the data parade along information avenue.

The contributors argue persuasively for a reorientation of the archival mission to meet not just the expectations of our expanded clientele, but also the real needs of tomorrow's mass society. These needs will be quite different from the élitist interests and expectations which fostered the emergence of modern archival institutions in the nineteenth century. To catch the jet into the future vision it seems that we must jettison the baggage of past practices and climb aboard quickly, or risk being left behind in outdated institutions which will inevitably become peripheral to society's needs. Does not the fate of the dinosaur await traditional archives in the future world of information? But how do we manage change? How do we adjust to different needs and enhanced expectations? Certainly it helps to have the "vision" before us. If, as Wilson argues, we need to change our vantage point to view archives through the eyes of society, then it is equally true that we also need an understanding of the past we are being asked to abandon, as well as an understanding of our present condition which reaches beyond ennui and frustration. The vision is only one ingredient in the recipe for change and development. We need hard, verifiable, empirical data which is subject to analysis and interpretation, and thereby can influence planning.

How can we reconcile the tensions evident in these four papers? Other perspectives are possible on the public service themes discussed in them. The future vision is not the matter which needs to be explored. Rather, certain parallel issues must also be considered if changes are to be both productive and constructive. Perhaps it would be best to begin by declaring myself. I am in fundamental agreement with Terry Cook's main thesis that the focus of all archival work must be the record. It is the record which is the hub of the archival wheel: all our other functions radiate out from it: all of our programmes must be firmly attached to it. Yet I hope — this fundamental agreement notwithstanding — that I can still suggest some areas which warrant further discussion and exploration. I must also declare that I am no apologist for reference service which effectively restricts access: public services must be developed as integral parts of each archives operation. Each and every user should leave our institutions, not with a sigh of relief at having successfully negotiated an obstacle course, but with a genuine sense of satisfaction with his or her experience and an itch to return to continue the exploration. However, I do not advocate replacing either the real or the perceived barriers of the past with future short cuts: rather than short cuts, we need readable maps, well-paved and maintained avenues, and a crack corps-of-patrol which can provide direction and help

to the traveller. While we must remove the "mystery" which cloaks archival research, we must not at the same time purge the unique character of archival information. For the novice user, we must replace the mystery of the finding aid with a delight in working with records; for the sophisticated client, mystery must be replaced by respect for the evidence that archival documents can provide.

All of the contributors acknowledge the importance of context, both for understanding the role of records in the society which created them and for appreciating the meaning of the information contained in the document. But paradoxically, if we step back and look at ourselves, we have precious little knowledge of our own history as a profession and as institutions. This means that we have an imperfect understanding of our present condition and of the forces which give it shape. There is no question that we need user surveys and all the other methodological trappings of management problem-solving. But we also need perceptive, challenging and, most of all, numerous studies of our own past. For a profession which deals with the documentary evidences of the past, and for institutions which have a long history, we are remarkably poorly served by a literature which fails to ask questions about our own historical condition. We seem often to be satisfied with lamenting what we are, rather than studying our past in order to understand why we are thus.

Blais and Enns are not entirely correct in declaring that public services have always been on the periphery of the archives tradition. The integrated model of archival functions has always existed, but the mix and balance has been quite different from what is projected as the ideal for the future. Jenkinson emphasized care as the key ingredient, whereas Schellenberg concentrated on close ties to the creators. Both, nevertheless, acknowledged the importance of use. But use was conceptualized quite differently from how it is at present, and its integration and balance in the archives equation were unlike that which we would like to see in the future. Wilson correctly points to documentary publication, an important ingredient in early twentieth-century archives, as a key programme designed to increase access, but for a very different public. Both Blais and Enns and Ericson draw attention to the changes in archives clientele. Ericson emphasizes the mythic element in our much vaunted and idealized "scholarly" user, while Blais and Enns, with characteristic precision, point to change as revealed in statistics gathered at the National Archives of Canada. Blais and Enns are right to urge us to pay more attention to managerial skills, and to use the empirical tools of market analysis for proper planning to adjust the archival mix, so that public programmes have an important place in archives services. Ericson would go even farther, urging archivists to develop a mind-set in which the "public" or the user is always placed at the centre of consideration. It is not sufficient to relegate the "user" to the manager's plans; users must be the first priority of all archives activities.

Whereas it is undoubtedly important to understand the changes that are occurring today, it is equally important to understand the reality of past experience. Is this the first shift in clientele? I think not. The influx of historians in the late nineteenth century, possibly replacing lawyers and administrators, was a significant change in the profile of archives users. We need to know not only what is going on in our search rooms today, but also what the situation was in the past and how response to change was managed, or not managed, as the case may be. I think that an unspoken assumption is that, with some minor differences, all of our institutions have pretty well developed along parallel lines. This assumption and others like it need to be tested against the reality of historical

experience. I shall not be so rash as to predict what we shall discover by studying ourselves, but I am sure that such studies will give us a much sounder understanding of our present condition. Perhaps, as Ericson suggests, we do cling to debilitating myths about our past. However, without a sound knowledge and understanding of our past and present condition, we run the risk of replacing one set of myths with another equally unfounded in reality. Is Ericson right that our public shyness stems from a deep uneasiness about our failure to acquire relevant materials? Or are we just exhausted after the flood of post-war records? It would seem to be unfair, if not contradictory, to conduct public tours of the Armenian earthquake zone and at the same time complain about the collapse of public services!

Paul Valéry once said that when you go into yourself, be sure to go well-armed. What Cook refers to as the “trendy” rhetoric of consumerism, which is being employed to conceptualize public service, is not the first time that archivists have used the currently popular language of commerce and business. Indeed, at least since Schellenberg, whom Cook cites as one of the giants of archival theory, archivists have adopted the imagery of business to help sell themselves and their services. In the 1980s it might have been the imagery of client-obsession which abounded in Reaganite America, but in the 1940s and 1950s the “modern” archivist used the language of New Deal statism, with its emphasis on the benefits of a managerial technocracy and of efficiency. The post-World War II concentration on records management, on archives as an integral part of records administration, and on the archivist as a contributing partner to the corporate managerial team is, I think, both a precedent and an exemplar of the “trendy” use of the language of business. This is not to dismiss both “New Deal” and “Reaganite” language because they are “trendy.” Rather, what we should do is try to understand why this has taken place. I think that in the latter case, the emphasis on efficiency and managerial skills as they relate to records helped archives to clarify their role in a changing record environment. Perhaps the present exploration of a new archives/user relationship will also help us further to develop archival theory to adjust to new changes in records ecology. But just as Cook has pointed to the neglect of reference services in Schellenberg, so we now must be wary of projecting all other archival functions in orbit around the new-found sun of our “public.”

For those such as Cook, who are uneasy about the direction of public services and about the tone and language in which public service-related issues are cast, I sense just a hint of nostalgia for a lost golden age of archives in which fewer demands from both creators and the public left the archivist with time to study the records, and provide one-to-one service in the best Socratic and aristocratic traditions. A careful investigation of the past will inevitably tarnish that image. The “golden age” is not, of course, behind us but, as always, ahead of us, tantalizingly just beyond our reach. It is the vision of ourselves which we are always striving to attain. Cook points to the new and challenging steps that archivists are taking to move the profession further along the road towards this vision — the work of the Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards and the theoretical models of appraisal embodied in documentation strategies — to which we should add the new emphasis on reference services and public programming: these are all bold and important initiatives. Descriptive standards will lead us straight to the heart of our professional practice; documentation strategies will require each of us separately, and then in concert, to examine our policies regarding acquisition; public programmes will direct our attention to our social role and what it should be. All of these ventures will

compel us, soon, to examine the practical links which have to be developed among institutions, and perhaps even to contemplate a division of labour and an hierarchical delivery of services. Technological breakthroughs will not solve what are essentially political problems: we have yet to be baptized in the waters of cooperation. The archival agenda for the 1990s will be based on cooperative programmes, and we have barely begun to discuss the implications which this may have for the future of archives.

But if the archival golden age lies somewhere in an unpredictable future along a path which often seems obscure, we can, as we begin the journey, take strength from one simple fact. Change is a necessary part of the archives condition; as our records change, so do we: as our clients change, so do we. Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the other theoretical giant to whom Cook refers, lamented that the revolution in the production of records which took place in the British bureaucracy during World War I was fundamentally altering his cherished principles even as he was elaborating them in the *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922). We should not forget that the theoreticians of the past were themselves the products of a particular record environment. We can assess and apply their theories today, providing we understand the extent to which these theories reflect a particular historical condition of records-making and records-keeping. In a very real way, Elsie Freeman is right: the theories of the past, if more than just rules of order or practice, may simply be principles which are only valid within a specific historical context. We now need new theories to integrate the records produced by modern society in the complex work of archives.

An unchallenged assumption of archivists has always been that archives provide a clear memory of administrative action and, as such, archival repositories render valuable service to the sponsoring institution. Yet I have heard senior managers say that the only administrative memory useful to them is that which extends as far back as the files kept in their desks; that new ideas and new conditions make it necessary to start afresh when setting out to solve a problem; that the one-time expenditure of money for consultants is a more productive use of resources and has a greater political return than the continuing expenditure on archives. In this scenario, the archives provides little of value to the modern ahistorical manager and his "now" administration. Indeed, the archives is not only an unnecessary luxury, but also (and more critically) an administrative liability. The archivist here is entering, very poorly armed, into a world dominated by the politics of forgetfulness. Does the self-evident truth of a long cherished archival assumption now reveal itself to be only the timely opportunism of our predecessors? I suppose a more important question would be, Are we condemned by our very nature as creatures of a changing record culture to be constantly living through trends without ever resting at least part of our burden on a firm bedrock of unshakeable and unchanging principles?

The answer, in my view, is that the fundamental reality of our work is the record: its physical nature, its creation, its uses and its relationship to the values of our society. The document is not a stifling prison for data; the context and the form of the document give additional meaning to the information contained within. It was the same for documents produced by medieval chanceries as it is for modern bureaucratic offices, and — if you will — post-modern data banks. Archivists do not deal with isolated and free-floating bits of information, but with their documentary expression. Our visions of the future, as well as our plans and programmes, must be firmly anchored in the reality of the record. Documentary information is unlike any other kind of data; access to it and use of it make a unique contribution to society.

The apocalyptic imagery we employ partly to convey a sense of importance and urgency to the issues we are discussing, can in the long run do us a disservice. The “brinks,” the “edges,” the “gaps” and the “anxieties” are perhaps all very real, but they do convey what seems to me essentially a false sense of danger in the inevitable process of change. But if not danger, then what? How can we visualize the choices before us and their perceived consequences? In an interview with BBC Radio 4 at the height of the *Satanic Verses* affair, Salman Rushdie explained the power that fiction has for him. He likened our mortal existence to life in a house well provided with roof, walls and a floor. Yet such a life, locked up within our own culture was, in the end, the life of a prisoner. How much happier and freer we are when we have windows and doors, which allow us to see beyond our four walls, and move about among the other rooms. Fiction provides the doors and windows, for Rushdie. Perhaps the domestic image of a house lacks a metaphorical wallop, but it does provide us with another way of seeing ourselves. archives is a large house with many rooms. All of them have a place in the house, and all of them have a function as part of the whole. What provides the doors and windows between the rooms are the records in our care; records unite us all. Exploring the archival home is a voyage of constant discovery and excitement; archives users as much as practitioners should share in this excitement. The pleasure of discovery which we have often seen in one researcher should stimulate us to make the joy of discovery in records a part of the experience of every user. From a public-service point of view, the challenge before us would seem to be how to expand the archivally literate public; how to communicate our excitement to the researchers; how to infect them with this same excitement; and, in the end, how to create public programmes which do precisely that.

I suggest that in the “trendy” imagery of modern business our real clients are the records. And continuing this reversal of roles, the user should be our product. The commercial imperative of the heritage industry model, that we must be sensitive to the demands of our clients and that we must deliver an increasingly large and high-quality product, makes better sense if we alter the model to adapt it to our own condition. Our client is the record and our product is the user. For the sake of argument, let us for a moment change our language from one of business imperatives to one of moral choice. In facing up and facing out we need to take a stand: are we “pro-information” or are we “pro-document”? This is a profoundly important choice, which will affect our future. My own conviction is that archival information is unlike any other because its unique documentary expression is rich in associated values, in relationships, even in emotion. For those so inclined to seek it, documents can only bear the truth. Our researchers should not just be classified as the users of archives, nor should they be made spectators or voyeurs or customers; rather, they must in the future become participants in the archival mission.

Note

- * A commentary on the four preceding papers delivered in Victoria, B.C. at the 1990 Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists.