

Are We Collecting the “Right Stuff”?

by CAROLYN HEALD*

Introduction

I have called this article, “Are we collecting the ‘Right Stuff’?” because it is about *stuff*--objects, hold-in-your-hands artifacts that we as archivists collect, as opposed to *information* which is ephemeral and perceived only by the intellect.¹ In other words, the article is about artifacts vs. information, or the age-old dichotomy between form and content.

We are told that we live in an information age; increasingly archivists are advised to re-invent themselves as purveyors of information. We are information managers, or information specialists; we provide access to information. It is easy to understand why this self-perception has come about in recent years. The medium of record is becoming more ephemeral, less fixed as we continue to immerse ourselves further and further in the world of databases and automated access to perform more of our daily tasks. Information is coming from a wide variety of sources, and with the use of computer technology and micrographics, the content of records, as far as many people are concerned, is increasingly divorced from, and seemingly less dependent on, the form.

Is this rupture a good thing? Are virtual archives on the horizon? Does the favouring of content/information over form/artifact reflect the professional archival mandate? Are we as archivists in the information business or the artifact business?

Content vs. Form

With the dawn of the so-called “information age,” archivists have been developing strategies for dealing with the copious amounts of data that now come our way. One method has concentrated on making increasing amounts of data available through the use of computer technology, and turning ourselves into shiny, new “information professionals,” shunting data from archives to users on demand. Such a vision for

the profession has been articulated in the consultation paper produced by the Alliance of Librarians, Archivists, and Records Managers. ALARM, as this group has labelled itself, is working to develop a national human resource strategy for the Information Resource Sector as part of a larger process supported by the federal Department of Human Resources Development. "People who work in records management, in archives and in libraries," the paper says, "all work with information."² While the report makes valuable points about archives and the related library and records management professions, certain comments strike a sour chord. For example, the ALARM Committee writes: "It is our goal to reposition our sector to manage effectively within an information technology context, an increasing amount of information."³ Later, the report says in a disparaging tone, that "many people associate us more with the object which carries the information than with the information itself."⁴

Indeed, the whole thrust of the ALARM report is towards information technology, in a bid to bring archivists, librarians, and records managers into the automated twenty-first century. I have no problem with that. We need to harness new technologies to our purposes, just as librarians have done successfully for decades. What disturbs me is the muddled thinking surrounding the word "information." What is that great and glorious resource, information? Is it an automated office environment that allows employees and clientele easier access to our holdings? Is it electronic records created by organizations and publishers? Is it bits and bytes of decontextualized data transferred from a tangible medium to an electronic one? The latter sense of information, the decontextualized, automated stuff, is forwarded both as the reality in which we live and the end to which we aspire. The idea here is that our clientele seeks quick and easy answers to questions with no regard for the provenance or nature of the documents from which those answers come. That may be true in many cases. A family historian looking for an Ontario ancestor's birthdate may not care that the provincial Registrar General is responsible for collecting statistics on births, marriages, and deaths; however, it may be of supreme importance for her to know that these statistics begin in 1868, and that Anglican and Catholic clergymen were not as diligent about sending their returns to Toronto in the early years as were the Methodists and Presbyterians. Such contextual information can make all the difference to her research. Nor is our genealogist concerned about format. Whether her ancestor's birthdate can be found on paper or on microfilm, or whether an archivist extracts it and sends it to her in a letter may be inconsequential. However, it could matter a great deal if the extract were taken from a local clergyman's return, rather than from the central, computer-indexed registration that is removed spatially and temporally from the event, and is more susceptible to errors.

As archivists, we like to think we are sensitive to the importance of context and form. We like to think we understand the medium of information transmission as much as we understand the context of creation and the content. However, when it comes to electronic information, form and context are thrown to the wind: the act of transmission becomes paramount; the medium is seen to be neutral. Are we being blinded by our own cultural milieu? Information technology is just as much a cultural artifact as paper, videotape, papyrus, or stone; our mission as archivists is to understand the cultural role of computer records *within* society, not to become their servant. It is our job as archivists to situate and understand technology as a cultural artifact--as a

medium of information transmission--of the late twentieth century, to understand how it works, its social impact, its forms and functions--indeed the very nature of the record--just as we have come to understand other media. It does not mean discarding all the past products of our heritage, transferring them to electronic media, decontextualizing the knowledge they contain in their words and images and in their very format. ALARM may be simply an expedient to ensure continued funding of archives, but is there a danger in re-inventing ourselves as computerized "information specialists"?⁵

The Bookless Library and the Paperless Archives

Let us consider several examples of the information/artifact dichotomy in the non-electronic records environment, because here form is unarguably tangible. Some people in the United States who deal with rare books and manuscripts have been critical of the separation of information from object, manifested through criticism of the massive content preservation programme in American libraries. The problem with brittle paper due to high acidity levels has reached crisis proportions; recent estimates indicate that in the US, 300 to 350 million volumes in research libraries are threatened, and approximately 100 million are already brittle. The problem is equally serious in Canada where, for example, the University of Toronto estimates that two million of its volumes are printed on brittle paper.⁶ The solution adopted by many libraries has been to microfilm these materials since deacidification is simply not feasible. It is a solution that has been embraced eagerly by many. Few repositories have any qualms about microfilming for preservation purposes and then throwing away the original, or letting the item deteriorate on the shelf unless, of course, it is deemed to be one of the few items possessing intrinsic value. In discussing the preservation efforts at the National Library of Canada in 1981, National Librarian Guy Sylvestre noted that "for the majority of volumes, it is the intellectual content, rather than the physical item, that is in need of salvaging."⁷

While all of this preservation activity seems laudable, not everyone is happy with the separation of information from artifact. Thomas Adams, a rare book librarian at Brown University, points out that the rare book library is more like a museum, serving history and the interests of scholarship with its emphasis on the artifact.⁸ Others have elaborated on this argument, most notably the well-known analytical bibliographer and director of the Guggenheim museum, Thomas Tanselle.⁹ For Tanselle, the primary factor is the evidential value inherent in objects. What is it, and what does it tell us about the past? Books provide evidence of the societies that created them, and in that sense they are "social products"; "the study of the past," he says, "is inseparable from the physical objects that provide tangible evidences of the past."¹⁰ Just because they contain text, why are they any different from museum objects, which also transmit information, just not in a literate fashion? Ideas cannot be separated from the medium that carries them because *how* ideas are transmitted is just as important as *what* those ideas are. The medium provides the context, and ideas, like anything else, cannot be understood in a vacuum. Says Tanselle, "All artifacts can be read, once their language is learned, for what they have to tell about their own production and about the place they held in the lives of those who previously possessed them. All are evidences of human activity, manifestations of the physical basis of culture."¹¹

The other problem with copies, of course, are the physical limitations. Colour and size often lend meaning to documents. Historical bibliographers have been able to pinpoint the exact print shop from which a rare book was issued just by studying types of paper and print. With archival documents, the situation is often more complicated where collation of items and original order within series is significant. A recent case in point has been illuminated in the *New Yorker* magazine in an article describing Third Reich documents preserved at the Berlin Document Centre. These records were under the control and administration of the United States since the end of World War II. Now, with the reunification of Germany, they have been transferred to German custody; but first, they were microfilmed in order that the United States could have a copy. Although the Germans plan to retain the originals, American researchers familiar with the documents are anxious about "the impossibility of preserving the special characteristics of certain originals on microfilm copies."¹² Gerald Posner notes several of these problems:

On many Third Reich documents, the colors of handwritten jottings in the margins provide the clue to who wrote them. (Himmler, for instance, always used a green pencil.) But colors are not reproduced on microfilm. Another problem is that many of the early Nazi Party cards, issued between 1925 and 1933, have dark-blue ink on a bluish background. They are difficult to read on the originals, and almost impossible on a copy.... There is the further complication that some Party-membership dossiers include six different cards; it is important to read them in the order in which they were originally attached, but often the cards within a file have become separated. [A researcher], who worked with thousands of such cards during his multi-year study, recalled, "Only by matching up a staple mark or seeing how a card is separated along the edge can a researcher put the cards together in a single file. With film, you can't see these types of physical marks, and it means you can't match them up at all."¹³

Colours, collation, and quality of the print or writing can all affect the usefulness of microfilm or imaged copies. The words might be preserved, but important non-textual physical evidence may be lost.

There is another argument made against preservation of information, one seen more often in the archival literature. Here, the emphasis is on the medium of record, or the question of how the record is used. How did records creators interact with the materials they produced? Archivists such as Hugh Taylor and Barbara Craig have been leading proponents of Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum "the medium is the message." It is the contextual interaction between the content and its documentary expression that is important. For example, Barbara Craig has conducted considerable research into hospital records--their forms, contents, and uses. She has shown how hospital registers--large, bound volumes--were kept up, when entries were made, and why. It is easy to understand, when examining the originals, that the physician could not possibly have carried the registers around from ward to ward; clinical notes must have been transcribed a while after the examination of the patient. Anyone encountering the register on microfilm would not be struck by the sheer physical presence of the original.¹⁴

Even more recently, Lorraine O'Donnell has added a sophisticated perspective on the form of photographic records and how they were used. In a recent issue of *Archivaria*, she argues convincingly that the genre of family photographs helps us to reach important conclusions about the history and ideology of the social structure called "the family" through its positive self-construction and story-telling technique. Says O'Donnell, "The meaning of a record is determined by the social and historical aspects of its form. Archivists must accept that the history of each physical form is central to understanding the meaning of records."¹⁵

The whole question of how people interact with and use documents is an interesting one, and applies equally well to micrographics. Perhaps if the proponents of informational content preservation asked themselves why users complain about using microfilm, they might appreciate Tanselle's point that each copy is a new document, and Craig's perception that people interact with different formats in different ways. Books and manuscripts were not meant to be miniaturized and subsequently read with the aid of a large, imposing piece of machinery. Indeed, books were a tremendous piece of technology; microfilm marks a retreat to the awkward format of medieval scrolls.

By this time you may be thinking to yourself, "Sure, I would like to preserve all those items in their original format, but as an archivist working in the era of *RAD*, I must be concerned primarily with fonds and series, and secondarily with items." This is a valid argument, and thus perhaps the question becomes: How much context are we as archivists willing to destroy? This question is not merely a theoretical consideration; it has found tangible expression in the land records fiasco at the Archives of Ontario.¹⁶ In the mid-1980s, the Archives of Ontario made a decision to destroy all the land deeds from 1867 to 1945 that were cluttering up the local land registry offices around the province. The deeds in question bore the signatures of the parties involved in each land transaction. Copybooks, in which all the information had been transcribed chronologically, existed and had been microfilmed for public use. There was no use keeping the bits of paper when, it seemed, perfectly good copies could be had in the copybooks (either in the hardcopy or on microfilm). Nevertheless, the hue and cry raised by the heritage community over the impending destruction of the deeds was deafening. It did not matter that the original copybooks were old, historical records in their own right, and that they were being preserved. The point was that the old copybooks contained only a *copy* of the deed; the pieces of paper with the signatures--our ancestors' signatures--were to be destroyed! Such was the emotional and symbolic pull of the deeds that even the old copybooks were unsatisfactory substitutes. Clearly in this case, not just age but a deeper personal and societal commitment was at issue.

Microforms and photocopies have their place, provided one understands that they are not the original, and that they cannot replace the original. Primarily, one must understand the content in context: i.e., the words or images embedded within their documentary expression. The whole problem comes down to a question of whether archivists are providers of information or the guardians of the cultural transmitters of information. Do we deal in information, or do we deal in artifacts in which information inheres? If we are information providers, then content preservation will be seen as a good thing; if we are guardians of cultural artifacts, then it can only be seen as a necessary evil at best. Our librarian colleagues tend toward the former

view, as is clear from a quick review of any graduate library school course calendar: the emphasis is on information and gaining access to it, not on artifacts. Archives, however, have not yet decided where they fall. But whatever the emphasis, the points Tom Tanselle and others make so eloquently are valid and must be taken into consideration. Each source of information is an artifact with its own unique characteristics, whether that be a book, a manuscript, a microfilm, or a CD-ROM. A copy is not the original. A copy is a separate and distinct artifact that cannot possibly contain all the characteristics of the original. The informational content is not the whole story; non-textual, physical evidence counts as well.

The Information Age and the Cultural Role of Archives

The information vs. artifact debate comes down to a matter of defining our cultural mandate. Why do archives exist? What or whose ends do we serve? In her keynote address to the 1994 conference of the Archives Association of Ontario, Shirley Spragge invoked the image of the Janus Continuum, an oxymoron that makes perfect sense for archivists. Janus is the Roman god of beginnings and endings, stationed in his doorway looking both forwards and backwards, or as Dr. Spragge noted, with one foot in the past and one in the future. It is not the dichotomous, either/or position, but rather the continual turning around from past to present to future to present to past--the continuum--that makes sense. The continuum rightly implies that there is no break between these modes of existence. What links them all for us is records, or our documentary heritage--whether that be parchment, paper, or computer tapes.

Perhaps this is the locus where archives succeed culturally over libraries. Libraries are oriented squarely towards the future. Their headlong embrace of new technologies, their retrospective conversions of their idiosyncratic card catalogues¹⁷--such activities have allowed libraries to automate more quickly than archives, but, in return, they are rapidly losing an understanding of the heritage of the book and the means of communication through the printed word. Archivists straddle that boundary between information and artifacts. The ALARM report says disparagingly that "Archives will become the 'museums of paper'." Frankly, I see nothing wrong with that. We need the paper as much as we need computers. Museums are cultural institutions that preserve and interpret social phenomena in the material world. Do not archives do the same thing? We are custodians of objects. How much contextual information embedded in documentary artifacts are we willing to discard as irrelevant? Are we currently safeguarding the nation's tangible heritage only until such time as it can be crammed onto CD-ROM and accessed from home computers?

I fundamentally disagree with the notion that archives store information; we store artifacts in which information inheres. We are, if you like, a documents museum, preserving formats of our documentary heritage. That our documentary heritage increasingly resides in computer bits and bytes makes no difference. We still must strive to comprehend the nature of the medium. What do electronic records tell us about society? The fact that data are transitory, must be refreshed constantly, and will not be in the same format forever, says much about current social values and trends: the disposable, fragmented society, constantly in flux. What does it say about social and organizational hierarchies, for example, that the data entry clerk can communicate with the company president through e-mail?

The issue is not how much decontextualized "information" regardless of form can be transmitted to our users. The real professional issue is this: what do the objects--both their medium and their message--tell us about past society, and how can we use those insights to aid in our appraisal and arrangement and description functions? I am neither advocating ignoring our users' needs nor ducking our preservation responsibilities. Sure--transcribe that ancestor's birthdate, microfilm those crumbling case files, mount those inventories on the Internet. But let us not hitch our *raison d'être* solely to the potential of the information highway. Let us try to rise above a merely presentist view. We need to be rooted firmly in the material manifestations of information, in the documentary heritage of Canadian society both present and past.

Notes

- * Originally presented at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists held in Regina, Saskatchewan, 15 June 1995.
- 1 The phrase "The Right Stuff" was suggested to me by Joan Schwartz at the 1994 ACA conference in Ottawa as we were listening to various papers on the nature of records and information technology. My appreciation is also extended to Jim Suderman, my colleague at the Archives of Ontario, who read two earlier versions of this paper and helped to clarify several key points.
- 2 Alliance of Archives, Libraries and Records Management, "The Information Resources Sector Consultation Paper" (24 May 1994), p. 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 5 ALARM's interim report, published in December 1994 after input from the various "information professions," has given some recognition to form of information; however, the view still persists that archivists, librarians, and records managers will be, and indeed should be, functioning in a totally automated environment. See *Towards a Strategy for Human Resource Development in Libraries, Archives and Records Management, Interim Report of the Alliance of Libraries, Archives and Records Management* (Ottawa, 1994).
- 6 See the following publications: *Preservation of Library and Archival Materials* (Alexandria, Va., 1991), p. 8; Canadian Cooperative Preservation Project, *Guidelines for Preservation Microfilming in Canadian Libraries* (Ottawa, 1993), p. 6; Hans Rutimann, *The International Project, 1992 Update* (Washington, 1993), p. 3.
- 7 Guy Sylvestre, "A National Preservation Program for Library Materials in Canada," *Libri* 31, no. 3 (1981), p. 186.
- 8 Thomas R. Adams, "Librarians as Enemies of Books?," *College & Research Libraries* 45, no. 3 (May 1984), pp. 196-206.
- 9 G. Thomas Tanselle, "Libraries, Museums, and Reading," *Raritan* XII, no. 1 (Summer 1992), pp. 63-82; and "Reproductions and Scholarship," *Studies in Bibliography* 42 (1989), pp. 25-54. Since Tanselle is a bibliographer, his focus naturally falls on books rather than manuscripts or other archival materials. Nevertheless, his arguments apply equally well to all forms of materials.
- 10 Tanselle, "Libraries, Museums, and Reading," p. 66.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
- 12 Gerald Posner, "Secrets of the Files," *New Yorker* (14 March 1994), p. 43.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 See Craig's two articles, "Hospital Records and Record-Keeping, c. 1850-1950," (Parts I and II) *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-90), pp. 57-87, and *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), pp. 21-38.
- 15 Lorraine O'Donnell, "Towards Total Archives: The Form and Meaning of Photographic Records," *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994), p. 113.
- 16 The controversy is documented throughout the various archival newsletters of the time; however, a concise summary emphasizing the symbolic factors, can be found in M. Anne MacDermaid, "The Essence of Archival Communication," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 227-40.
- 17 For an erudite and entertaining critique of library "recon" (retrospective conversion) projects see Nicholson Baker, "Annals of Scholarship: Discards," *New Yorker* (4 April 1994).