

## ***“Professional Education in the Most Expansive Sense”: What Will the Archivist Need to Know in the Twenty-First Century?***

by TOM NESMITH

In the popular novel *Disclosure*, Tom Sanders, an executive at an American information technology design company, wears a special headset to enter the company's computerized “virtual” records office in a frantic search for records which will defend him against a charge of mismanaging a company project. A real person, Michael Deering of Sun Microsystems Inc. of Seattle, reports that his company is working on a prototype of such a virtual records system. He says, “it will be a simpler type than what you saw in *Disclosure*, but it will remind you very much of that.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps one day in the next century we will make available to users of archives finding aids and records which they will view with a virtual reality headset or eye glasses, which may indeed be an all-purpose appliance, that is simply turned on at home or anywhere, and archives are beamed up. We are flooded with such scenarios for the future development of and access to communications. We feel very much in the current of major changes in the way people record and communicate.

What do these developments portend for archives in the twenty-first century? What will an archivist need to know in the next century? To the extent that we can even answer these questions, the answers depend on the kind of future we anticipate for archives in the next century. There are both optimistic and pessimistic outlooks on the future of archives. In some respects the future may be quite hostile to the archival endeavour. I think that by the end of the twenty-first century computerization will be as central to human recording as paper has been in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Frank Burke has raised the spectre of vast unmanageable computerized communications as a result.<sup>2</sup> Ephemeral computerized communications defy long-term retention, and thus far they have often eluded recordness. Some worry about the erosion of the familiar central archival institution in the computer age. Can the archival presence in our society flourish without such architectural monuments? And will the cost of computerized archives be more than society will pay? Then there is the dispiriting present-mindedness of a society caught up in rapid and complex change.

Or will the distinctive archival role be swallowed up in inevitable alliances with other professions, overshadowed by their concerns in a future marked by converging communications technologies and information professions?

A more optimistic approach might begin by turning back to *Disclosure*. Even in this most futuristic computerized scenario, records exist; they are organized into a record-keeping system; they are well protected and accessible. It does not seem reasonable to me that society in the next century can function without records, record-keeping, and knowledge of the past. In fact, a video prepared by Microsoft's Bill Gates on the future of computerization contains various examples of the use of computerized records, from legal and medical uses to an educational use in which a teenager prepares and presents a high school history project on pre-Columbian art, all by computer.<sup>3</sup>

Gates's video and Tom Sanders's visit to the virtual records office imply other possibilities for archival work itself. The computerization of communications may result in greatly reducing one major structural problem archives have long faced, which is that records have been cumbersome to move, use, and store. A great deal of archival effort has gone into dealing with these problems. Historian of writing Henri-Jean Martin anticipates humanity's liberation from these constraints in the computer age.<sup>4</sup> Archivists may be among the chief beneficiaries of such a development in the next century. Archives may well be far more easy to protect, handle, and make accessible than ever before. Gates envisions computerized information anywhere, anytime, through powerful computers in our homes, cars, and even wallets. In *Disclosure*, Tom Sanders navigates the virtual records office with physical ease. The intellectual aspects of archival work may well come much more prominently to the fore in the next century as a result of computerization. Archivists may be able to concentrate far more on the increasingly important intellectual aspects of our work, particularly in appraisal, description, and widening public understanding of archives and uses of archives. Liberated from some of the physical constraints of traditional archival records, the next century may yet permit us to see the fulfilment of our hope that archives become a well-understood and commonly-used feature of our communities.

Archives will persist in the next century and may well flourish, but the way archival services are provided is likely to change a great deal as a result of computerization of records and means of access to them. The intellectual substance and social purpose of our work, however, will not change that much. We are on our way to this new archival practice, as the recent ferment of ideas in virtually all areas of our work indicates,<sup>5</sup> but we do not need a new underlying principle to replace provenance or other basic concepts such as the nature of a record. We need to continue to refine our understanding of these ideas, and there may well be considerable debate about their meaning, but they will remain essential guides. A great deal of hard thinking will be required to adapt our implementation of these ideas to the user expectations and the economic, technological, communications, and institutional configurations of the twenty-first century, but the main features of the intellectual basis of our work will remain important. For example, understanding past and present developments in society and archives and past and present functions of record-creating individuals and institutions, records systems administration, and many individual types of records,

especially computerized ones, will still be important. Indeed, another century of developments in these areas will make this knowledge all the more voluminous and complex.

Although I am optimistic that archives can flourish in the twenty-first century, we have a considerable intellectual challenge in making the transition to viable archives, based on the new practice, in a continually changing communications environment. To make the transition I think we need above all a particular intellectual outlook, which will enable us to obtain the knowledge we will need, rather than simply some well established body of knowledge which we should aim to digest. I think we need to recognize that the central archival concerns now and in the future are not primarily technical or procedural, important as the latter two are. In other words, the work of archives is first of all an ongoing problem, not a set of settled techniques or procedures to master. Analysis of the problem begins with the question Why archives? What are they for anyway? What, therefore, should be in them or protected by them outside their confines, and why? How should archival materials be identified, and information in them located, when they cannot be read in their entirety, described in their entirety, and, in the computer age, even seen readily at all? Who should have access to them, and on what grounds? These questions are matters open to debate, interpretation, value judgements, and even philosophical analysis. Their answers are not self-evident and not simply matters of technique. They lead us into questions about human beliefs, behaviour, ethics, and needs. They lead us to explore the human interaction with recording, record-keeping, record use, and archives. How and why do people react the way they do to archives? What impact do records and archives have on society? These questions even cause us to ask whether the study of human interaction with recording and archives is a window on the study of human life, quite apart from all the information in archives which allows such study to go forward. The study of archives is very much a study of human beings (including archivists) and why and how they act when recording, keeping records, and placing, using, and perceiving them in archives. It is in large part the study of people and their institutions interacting with recorded memory. What happens when that happens? What impact does it have on individuals, institutions, and society?

Exploration of these important areas of inquiry for archivists energizes the great effort required to create viable archives and the development of sound archival techniques. Securing viable archives in the computer age is the greatest challenge the archival profession has ever faced. We will need a fierce commitment to the humane purposes of archives to see us through. Such thinking also energizes the pursuit of the rest of the knowledge we require to administer archives well. It gives these efforts meaning, priority, and focus. If we do not explore these questions for our society we may not be able to maintain many viable archives in the next century. After all, why should anyone bother with archives, at least very ambitious ones, if there really is not much point in having them? Technical proficiency, no matter how advanced, would then be irrelevant.

The first answer to the question what will an archivist need to know in the next century is not primarily technical, practical, or procedural knowledge. Important as these things are, they are but the means to the ends we seek. They are derivative of a prior intellectual outlook, which is the key intellectual possession we should have in

the next century and beyond. It is the key to the knowledge we will need. This outlook values the life of the mind in our field. It values the free play of the mind as it seeks theoretical clarity and practical measures. This mind is inquisitive, speculative, and open to what is valuable in both the new and the old. It is willing to hold ideas in tension if they cannot be easily reconciled, until they are reconciled, if that is possible. It tolerates diversity when reasonable and experienced people hold different views. It is animated by readiness to see the field whole, to welcome the various facets of the reality of archival work—from the earliest archives of New France (for Canadian archivists at least) to those of the computer age. It tries to embrace it all rather than conclude that since *my* work or experience is such and such, the *profession* requires to know only what I need to know or think is important. The archival profession is not any one of us writ large. There is a difference between what any individual archivist may be required to know well to do a task at hand and what a profession may need to know *as a collectivity* to do the many tasks it has to do. This intellect, while aiming high, also knows humility. It realizes that this profession's field of knowledge will continue to challenge our best efforts to classify and tame it. It will not be easily summed up. This should hold off the dead hand of dogmatism.

To ask what an archivist will need to know in the twenty-first century is, in a way, the wrong question. It is better to ask How should an archivist *think* in the next century? We can certainly identify general areas of knowledge archivists should know about, but we also know that as individuals we always have much less knowledge than we need at any one time. We are only human. Furthermore, we are often faced with change and new circumstances, which we cannot always predict and prepare for well. The key to our response to this is to develop judgement and wisdom in archival matters, so that we may choose what we learn wisely and then use it wisely to guide us when we navigate unknown waters—which will probably be what we will do most of the time in the next century and beyond. How do we do so? Graduate education in archival studies plays an important role here in fostering what might be called this archival frame of mind. Graduate education offers a very precious opportunity to exercise the ability to do so without the great pressures of day-to-day work. By exploring and addressing archives as a problem, graduate education in archival studies can teach students to question and clarify concepts and techniques, develop approaches to problems, examine the issues affecting these choices, and, equally important, learn how to find further information. Herein lies the paradox of professional education. It should be about thinking creatively within a field, more than about covering as much as possible of the accepted knowledge and techniques in the field. Professional education is not really about teaching the profession's knowledge exhaustively. As educator Jacques Barzun says, "The truth is, when all is said and done, one does not *teach a subject*, one teaches a student how to learn it."<sup>6</sup>

As we look to the next century, we must do something in our profession, especially in our professional education, which has been hard for other professions to do, but which many thoughtful observers say is necessary for professional and other leadership in the next century. Most professions have marginalized humanistic questions and modes of inquiry as they strive for professional status primarily through technical proficiency. Equally regrettably, many in the liberal arts have eschewed direct involvement in professional education. This observation has been made many times over the course of the twentieth century. In the 1980s in the United States, the failure

to make much headway in addressing the problem prompted the establishment of the Professional Preparation Network, which was a diversified group of about fifty academics representing both the liberal arts and professional fields. Its conclusions apply not only to the United States. The network deplored "the current schism between liberal and professional education" on American campuses. It asked "Why are we headed toward greater separation of liberal and professional study instead of closer integration?" It maintained that "The crux of today's educational problem is how to integrate liberal and professional study effectively, building upon the best that each has to offer."<sup>7</sup>

This concern has been echoed by other astute observers of academe and the workplace. The renowned management analyst Peter Drucker notes that we cannot afford to isolate the powerful approaches to thinking and societal utility represented by the liberal arts and technical expertise. In future, both types of knowledge will be crucial. The future society "needs the educated person even more than any earlier society did, and access to the great heritage of the past will have to be an essential element." Drucker rejects "the folly" of attempts "to repudiate the Great Tradition and the wisdom, beauty, knowledge that are the heritage of mankind." He adds, however, that "a bridge to the past is not enough. The educated person needs to be able to bring his or her knowledge to bear on the present, not to mention the future." "The educated person," he goes on,

will therefore have to be prepared to live and work simultaneously in two cultures—that of the "intellectual", who focuses on words and ideas, and that of the "manager", who focuses on people and work....The intellectual's world, unless counterbalanced by the manager, becomes one in which everybody does his own thing but nobody achieves anything. The manager's world, unless counterbalanced by the intellectual, becomes the stultifying bureaucracy of the "Organization Man". But if the two balance each other, there can be creativity and order, fulfillment, and mission.<sup>8</sup>

"To transcend this dichotomy in a new synthesis," Drucker says, "will be a central philosophical and educational challenge...."<sup>9</sup> I think that this is our primary intellectual and educational challenge as a profession too. Will we be able to wed the best of the humanistic intellectual traditions that have shaped the archival profession in the last century with the necessity to become expert in administrative and technical matters pertaining to archives? As we look ahead to a century which both dazzles and disturbs us with its technological and administrative complexities, we may be tempted either to take a mechanical, technocratic approach to it, and become consumed by its technical pressures, or tempted to escape from its unsettling technical changes and challenges into archival antiquarianism. We can and must avoid these extremes.

How the right balance is achieved will no doubt continue to evolve over time. As I see it, the way ahead for our profession is best opened by: (1) fostering the inquiring mind of our humanistic tradition; (2) employing the knowledge areas within that tradition that are most relevant to archival concerns (and I place historical knowledge about archives, records creators, records administration, and records at the head of that list); (3) mixing this knowledge with relevant, contemporary knowledge of administrative methods and technical matters; and (4) focusing this broad knowledge base on the archival problems we encounter. As we look to the twenty-first century,

we have a chance to develop new kinds of archives and archival services which will enable our societal function to flourish. But in order to ensure this future we must also become one of the new types of professions which are being called for. These professions will thrive because their humanistic outlook and knowledge energizes and infuses their pursuit of technical expertise. As one educator has said, "We must strive not for vocational training nor for a return to the traditional liberal arts but rather for professional education in the most expansive sense."<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

- 1 Michael Crichton, *Disclosure* (New York, 1993; 1994 paperback edition), pp. 431-49; *The Globe and Mail*, 9 May 1995, p. B26.
- 2 Frank Burke, "Chaos Through Communications: Archivists, Records Managers, and the Communications Phenomenon," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992).
- 3 Bill Gates's address to the Comdex convention, Las Vegas, November 1994. See also Gates with Nathan Myhrvold and Peter Rinearson, *The Road Ahead* (New York, 1995).
- 4 Henri-Jean Martin, *The History and Power of Writing* (Chicago, 1994), p. 495.
- 5 My unpublished manuscript "Bridging Two Worlds: From The Old Archival Practice to the New," a paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists, May 1994, provides an overview of the leading archival literature on the transition.
- 6 Morris Philipson, ed., *Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning* (Chicago, 1991), p. 35. (Emphasis in the original.) For a more detailed development of my ideas about graduate archival education see my "Hugh Taylor's Contextual Idea for Archives and the Foundation of Graduate Education in Archival Studies," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992).
- 7 The Professional Preparation Network, *Strengthening the Ties that Bind: Integrating Undergraduate Liberal and Professional Study* (1988), pp. 1, 15, 11. These points have also been made more recently by other observers of the contemporary workplace. Professor Thomas Vargish, a professor of English who teaches at the MIT Sloan School of Management, says that "I believe the humanities, and by extension the liberal arts, to be essential to serious executive education. Courses developed for undergraduates, for graduate students in professional schools ..., however excellent in themselves, are not sufficiently focused on executive concerns. Humanities courses designed specifically for executive development deal with values central to the practice of management.... The challenge to executives lies in acknowledging the substance of humanistic thinking and practicing its techniques; the challenge to educators is to focus that thinking on areas of executive experience." See his "The Value of Humanities in Executive Development," *Canadian Federation of the Humanities Bulletin* 17 (Winter 1995), p. 7. Meriel Bradford, Associate Vice-President, Corporate Affairs, Teleglobe Canada echoes these comments in "The Humanities, Why Bother?" *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13. It is also interesting to note that this combination of humanistic and technical intellectual ability is increasingly valued in the business world. In her *The 100 Best Jobs for the 1990s and Beyond* (New York, 1994), American business journalist Carol Klieman reports that many businesses are employing people with this background and ability because they are pleased with the results. "One of the best ways to prepare for corporate careers," she writes, "is to mix business courses with liberal arts, a well rounded approach that is appropriate for the 1990s" (p. 28).
- 8 Peter F. Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society* (New York, 1994), pp. 212, 215.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 10 F.H.T. Rhodes, "... Or What's a College For?" (an address at Harvard University, 13 November 1986) cited in *Strengthening the Ties that Bind*, p. 49.