

Where's Home? Documenting Locality at the Dawn of the Electronic Age

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Documenting Localities: A Practical Model for American Archivists and Manuscript Curators. RICHARD J. COX. Lanham, MD. and London: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1996. 200 p. ISBN: 0-8108-3043-4.

Many pundits are telling us that with the advent of cyberspace, territorial distance is gradually losing its status as the primary means of reckoning social and cultural distance and proximity, indeed presence and absence. One might wonder, then, as the notion of “deterritorialization” enters popular discourse, whether any locality can long continue to preserve its distinctive identity and local character – in a word, its sense of place.

Indeed, how important is locality at a time when people are reportedly abandoning Main Street, Downtown, and the public square, and staying at home to conduct various parts of their lives – at “home,” that is, on the highways and byways of the cosmopolitan “World Wide” web? Much of the allure of the Internet resides in its ability to allow people, alone in their houses or apartments, to communicate, that is, “meet,” anywhere, with anyone. Aided by network technology, individuals can now overcome the isolation and separation that geographical distances formerly imposed upon them. In the solitude of their homes, people can rendezvous in chat “rooms,” banter with distant family and friends, interact through e-mail with public institutions, hold impromptu collegial discussions on “listservs,” and post messages on “bulletin boards.” The Internet is also making it possible for people to “telework” at home, do business across continents as easily as they do across town, meet in virtual work spaces, educate themselves through “distance learning,” congregate at electronic “town” meetings, shop on-line – and for entertainment, exploit satellite dishes and remote video services.¹ Though the institutional rhetoric of the Internet often cleaves to the language of physical intimacy and geographical proximity, is there not also something inherently socially “delocalizing” – dislocating – about electronic culture? Northrop Frye

proposed in *The Bush Garden* that those Canadians engaged in the “national identity” game need to ask not, “Who am I?” but “Where is here?” Perhaps the growing population of cyberspace will soon need to ask the same question.

Having worked on a wide range of archival issues over the years, Richard Cox, one of the most prominent and prolific figures in archival education today, seems equally at home discussing archival education, the social aspects of professionalism, and electronic records issues. In *Documenting Localities*, Cox affirms the continuing importance of “localities” as a focus for archival work. As in his earlier *American Archival Analysis*, Cox brings together several previously published writings, these having appeared separately during a brief three-year span between 1988 and 1991. Though the present book inevitably covers some of the same terrain from one chapter to the next, one can nevertheless distill several criticisms of current archival practice well worth heeding, as well as some key proposals deserving the profession’s attention.

Here, in this collection, Cox applies his substantial energy and knowledge to the task of explaining what the concept of locality entails, why we should care, how we have, in the past, gone about documenting localities, and how we can – and must – improve on our performance. In fact, the second principal purpose of this book is to convince readers that what has been called “documentation strategy” (DS) offers a viable general approach to identifying and preserving the records necessary to document society, including localities in particular. This argument informs his criticisms of traditional archival acquisition and appraisal, and drives selection of the evidence he marshals in favour of the DS approach.

His arguments for DS and the importance of localities partly hinge, of course, on how successfully Cox handles the concept of locality. In other words, what intellectual distinctions might enable archivists to make “locality” a usable concept? Is locality primarily defined by social constructs and/or historically enduring relationships? Is it essentially delimited by territorial parameters? Might social institutions, neighborhoods, towns, cities, regions, and states, nations, even larger entities (including, for example, the European Economic Community) all potentially fit the criteria of locality? Are “locality” and the “local” within local history writing (upon which Cox draws frequently in support of the notion of locality) meant to convey the same meaning? Unfortunately, as Cox works his way through the complexities, the definitions he develops, along with several of the others to which he alludes (though suggestive), seem rooted tenuously in acceptance of subjective perspectives and the validity of varying interpretations born of individual circumstances. For example, Cox states that “locality is that geographical area (from neighborhood to county or city to region) that an individual identifies with because of cultural, political, socioeconomic, historical or other reasons” (p. 9), and, again that “the precise definition of locality is that most rooted in the particular needs of the archivists and their colleagues” (p. 10). In his search

for solid conceptual ground, Cox also turns to “community,” one of sociology’s most important but elusive notions. Yet, in so doing, he cites a definition, taken from a local historian, which again relies on subjective perceptions: “Students of community allow the people whom they study to say what a community is.” Though drawing on peoples’ individual needs and subjective beliefs for the description of social phenomena certainly has its place, more promising for Cox’s purposes, perhaps, is his reference to environmental historian John Mark Farragher’s conception of community as embodying spatial contiguity (“ecological relations”), sustained economic interaction and genealogical propinquity (“reproductive relations”), convergent political activity (“collective action”), and psychological affinities (“affective bonds”). Unfortunately, Cox never returns to Farragher’s scheme, once having introduced it.

Except for the final chapter, which deals with educational issues, the rest of the book is devoted to a discussion of how documenting localities might best be accomplished. As a prelude to this discussion, the second essay reviews some of the deficiencies in archives’ current acquisition practices and management approaches. Cox identifies three notable problems. First, he alludes to the persistence of a “collecting mentality” among record keepers. Siding with those who observe significant differences between a manuscript tradition and an archives tradition, Cox suggests that the collecting practices characterizing the former have exerted an unfortunate influence on archival practice, fostering a preoccupation with discrete historical objects and artifacts and deflecting attention from where it more properly belongs – the business environment or social context within which records are made. Reflecting increasingly prevalent thinking in the archival community, Cox claims that archivists’ traditional reliance in acquisition on examining the content of records is not only misplaced but impractical, especially as the volume of information and complexity of information systems grow exponentially. Cox urges archivists to forego the manuscript curator’s propensity to focus on records and their content in favour of the examination and analysis of the particular social and business environments from which records may emerge.

The second weakness Cox identifies in current archival practice is the frequent lack of strategies, policies, and plans to guide archives’ acquisition programs. He thus urges archives to develop more rational approaches in determining the nature and scope of their acquisition activities. Rather than languishing in their traditional passive attitude, accepting whatever records arrive haphazardly at their doorstep, archives must become more proactive; they must become more purposeful and discriminating in their approach to acquisition. In other words, archival programs and archival institutions need to establish acquisition policies and priorities. Too few archives have these now.

A third shortcoming, closely related to the previous two, is methodological: archivists have failed to improve their appraisal techniques. Citing observations found in Terry Cook’s writings on appraisal, Cox again criticizes

archives' reactive tendencies in matters of acquisition. These, he contends, should instead be guided by planned, systematic approaches firmly rooted in sound theory. Here, he also returns to the insufficient attention paid to the processes and contexts from which records originate. Cox thereby puts his finger on strategic and methodological problems that continue to afflict too many archives programs and repositories.

Cox finds the above problems present in many local repositories, also bemoaning the absence of local institutional and company archives (a failing which, of course, only adds to the other factors hampering efforts to document local history properly). He is particularly insistent about the current lack of any systematic, scientific basis for appraisal practices. In fact, the last chapter, on educational issues, dwells at length on the need to improve the profession's appraisal capacities. Cox discusses evidential and other criteria of archival value, while correctly singling out for criticism the seemingly unbounded, catch-all notion of "informational value." In finding a place for the concept of archival value and its associated schema, Cox (in these essays at least) does not thereby appear to follow David Bearman, who has called for abandonment of notions of value. In any case, such calls to expunge the language of value from formulations of archival methodology serve as much to mask persisting attributions of value as to displace them.

With the technology-induced growth of interest in function-, process-, and systems-based archival analysis, however, one is justified in questioning the continued relevance of records-based appraisal in archival practice. Records appraisal, one might argue, is a methodology that was developed long before records acquired their current status as epiphenomena. That is, appraisal, emerged during a time when archivists, often no doubt under the influence of historical training, commonly felt it necessary to resort to consultation of records (evidence) to get a reading on institutions, organizations, and social processes (rather than proceeding the other way around). When deemed strategically appropriate, archivists selectively examined files, assessed content and, with an understanding derived from their research, then attempted to assign value to files and series. To the extent that one can believe the current mythology, archivists of that era were generally oblivious to the systems, functions, processes, and other elements constituting contexts of record creation. As a consequence, one can certainly agree with Cox's support for what we term macroappraisal (though its shift in emphasis from records-level empirical research to high-level organizational and systems analysis arguably places it closer to an acquisition or disposition strategy than an appraisal methodology *per se*).

These and other issues that Cox selects for attention – especially lack of planning and inter-institutional coordination – lead quite naturally toward his proposed DS solution. Cox joins Helen Samuels and others who first articulated the need for planned, cooperative activity in a number of articles appear-

ing through the early to mid 1980s (though traces of the notion are discernible in archival literature from the seventies and earlier). DS has three key components. First, it requires that an interdisciplinary and inter-sectorial project team be assembled to delineate issues and define social activities within a chosen geographical area; second, it entails a proactive identification of the kinds of records that will adequately document the defined target issues, activities, and geographical area (Cox writes of “topics”); and, third, to achieve the first two goals, it requires the archives repositories participating in the project to coordinate acquisition on an inter-institutional basis.

The chapters on DS rehearse the flaws and dangers in Jenkinsonian laissez-faire attitudes (which place too much faith in the ability of record-creating organizations to keep good records) and in the paucity of local institutional repositories and archival programs and lack of systematic multi-institutional cooperation. DS (which shares characteristics with the Canadian notion of “total archives,” as well as with the lesser known “records complementarity” approach periodically discussed at the National Archives of Canada) is, by its “analytical ... nature, planned response, and cooperative approach,” designed to respond to these problems. These chapters present a number of case studies that provide valuable guidance on DS project management, documentation planning, and project funding. Also helpful and interesting are description of a DS research agenda, project worksheets, and suggestions of specific acquisition “topics.”

For logistical and methodological reasons, however, DS has met with a generally lukewarm reception. An earlier reviewer of *Documenting Localities* has asserted, with justification, that DS has so far failed to demonstrate its feasibility and that Cox’s arguments still do not prove his contentions.² Critics of DS have commonly cited two major problems. The first occurs when teams try to define the topic or topics and the geographical areas they wish to document. Without the concrete, constraining reality of institution-based provenance, archives lack objective criteria for defining the scope of their acquisition and documentation activity. In addition, the selection of themes or topics smacks too much of the librarian’s propensity for subject-oriented thinking. (This is why the difficult challenge of achieving conceptual rigor is so crucial to the methodological component of DS.) Other major obstacles are logistical in nature. First there is the difficulty of forming teams of committed stakeholders and keeping them together; second is the problem of finding the necessary resources for undertaking such a project. As far as I know, those few who have tried DS have finally abandoned it. Cox himself has reported some of these difficulties in the two case studies he presents.

Notwithstanding the issues that critics of DS have raised regarding implementation and methodology, Cox (assuming he remains a proponent of the strategy) may be justified in sticking to his guns. There are good reasons not to write DS off just yet.

First, on the question of strategy, DS may have been the right solution at the wrong time – a response appropriate for conditions that are only now beginning to appear above a not-so-distant horizon. As increasingly the Internet describes – in the sense of a compass inscribing a circle – more complex and arguably more unstable legal, institutional, organizational, social, and information topographies, DS may yet prove its usefulness (though by that time it may bear a different name). Interested stakeholders may also eventually become more amenable to participation in a working team. Emerging collaborative technologies may not only facilitate such work; with the very availability of these technologies, DS may become a more viable, indeed, logical instrument for use in guiding archives' acquisition activities.

Second, concerning methodology, the increasing linguistic “intelligence” and sophistication of digital content analysis and retrieval tools may eventually mitigate current uneasiness about the subjectivity of identifying appropriate themes and topics by reducing that subjectivity, though more work undoubtedly needs to be done in this area. In any case, the view that DS should be discarded because it fails to provide an objective grounding for the selection of documentation targets is partly rooted in implicit, not to say largely undocumented claims that a uniformity of purpose guides the actions of the profession's various constituencies. It is vital to understand the manner in which differently placed members of our profession deal (or do not deal) with the interrelationships and potential incongruities within methodological prescriptions, organizational and institutional strategies, and political and social roles. When measured against certain tacit conceptions of objectivity and neutrality that legitimize archival practice, DS does seem to fall short. For a number of reasons, then, the potential of DS remains largely untapped. For those interested in familiarizing themselves with its features and possibilities, however, there is no better place to begin than with *Documenting Localities*.

Cox is right, finally, to insist on the importance of documenting localities. In fact, nothing could be more pressing. We are entering upon a momentous period in history. For something approaching five thousand years, knowledge of the past has been thought to be intrinsically linked with the survival of material artifacts occupying physical space retained for extended periods of time. However, action now becomes urgent as electronically-based information technologies – which are on the verge of embodying a new principle of “anti-matter” (so to speak) – become everyday objects of celebration as triumphs of innovation over the inertial resistance of materiality and the tyranny of confinement to place. Archivists bear a heavy obligation to understand this rush of events and to carefully weigh the many implications and paradoxes they harbour for archives. As Cox does in his own way here, archivists must affirm the importance of persistence and place – or at least attempt to document their transformation or disappearance, along with the values they represent. This is just one paradox they face.

Perhaps for lack of time and of space, Cox does not explore the extent to which it may be expected that information and network technology will strengthen or undermine the integrity of localities and modify the various infrastructures of geographically-determined social systems. Although Cox's book already provides much food for thought, it also begs several questions. One wishes that he had found the wherewithal to update or supplement these essays, which first appeared just before electronic mail, the Internet, multimedia, and the web phenomenon began taking off in the early 1990s. There is surely a need to understand and document the impact that convergent electronic media may be having on the contemporary evolution of "locality" and "community" as intellectual concepts and socio-historical realities. For example, how relevant to DS, and archives programs in general, are Rheingold's notion of "virtual community," and the many popular speculations about "on-line communities," "community networks," and "communities of choice?" To what degree and in what respects will geographical coordinates continue to determine people's experience of life's human relationships, shape their sense of human connection and perception of social causality, and structure the recording of experience? And finally, what place may the much-anticipated virtual, post-custodial archives occupy; that is, what role might be reserved for "meta-archives" in the framework of a DS?

Notes

- 1 Indeed, with the digitization of finding aids and of records themselves, we can also expect the need to travel to archives, or to restrict oneself to local archives, will diminish. See the statistical analysis in Pedro Gonzalez, *Computerization of the Archivo General de Indias: Strategies and Results* (Washington, February 1999), Appendix 2.
- 2 Frank Boles, *American Archivist* 60, no. 4 (Fall 1997).