

BOOK REVIEWS

The National Archives and Statistical Research.

Meyer H. Fishbein. [Ed.] Athens, Ohio University Press, 1973. Pp 255. \$10.00.

This book is an edited compilation of the papers and proceedings of a National Archives and Records Service [NARS] Conference on Statistical Research held in 1968. The Conference was a "trialogue" consisting of "the producers of data [the Government agencies], the consumers of data, and the archivist as ... the preserver of data." (page 250)

Its "chief objectives ... were to explore the values of ... quantitative sources in the custody of the National Archives, to discuss the problems of embargoes on private data possessing considerable research value, to investigate current developments in the production and use of statistical data, and to predict future needs for data sources in machine readable form. ... Two general sessions ... were devoted to the role of the National Archives in preserving statistical sources, the access to these sources, and the many challenges faced by the producers, custodians, and users of such data when they are in machine readable form. ... In addition to the two general sessions ... concurrent panels discussed such areas of statistical concern as vital statistics, public opinion, population data, commerce, transportation, manufacturers, agriculture, wealth, income, labor, education, religion, and crime." (page xiii)

Two of the main objectives of the Conference are achieved by the panel papers on the various social indicators. Users will have a greater awareness of the statistical resources of the NARS and some Federal agencies; producers and custodians will have a greater awareness of the use being made of statistical data. The papers, however, are seldom more than a listing of statistical resources or of research work, and, consequently, read like bibliographies. On the other hand they are invaluable. Archivists will put down the book with a new appreciation of statistical data that cannot but affect their evaluation of what constitutes records of long term value.

Despite the fact that about fifty percent of the book is dedicated to panel papers, the heart of the book rests with the balance which presented and discussed in essence three archival problems relating to the preservation and use of statistical data. The first issue was raised by E.O. Alldredge of NARS in his paper on "Documentation for Conventional and Automated Systems". The problem in documentation is "how to visualize the user". In the past this was done by first "being a

trained historian, and second, by knowing that most of his users will be historians." Today, however, as "the range of interests within the discipline has widened ... it is now much more difficult to visualize the user." (page 18) It is incredible that Mr. Alldredge could speak to such a Conference and recognize the historian as the only user who is having an impact on the archivist's environment.

Mr. Alldredge then recites a relatively familiar litany of the pieces of information that may be found in a conventional piece of documentation, the preliminary inventory. What could have been significant is his description of the documentation requirements for machine readable files.

The supporting documentation for machine readable files is critical. For without it the files may be, in effect, destroyed. Mr. Alldredge undoubtedly realized this but approaches the subject from the viewpoint of the programmer/analyst concerned with the primary value of the data, and tangentially from the viewpoint of the archivist and the user who are concerned with secondary value. As a consequence, the documentation requirements defined are ideal for the general territory, but the archivist and user do not require so extensive or broad a tour. Finally, Mr. Alldredge has omitted a very significant portion of documentation necessary to machine readable statistical data. Without going into detail, statistical data is gathered based on certain assumptions, with certain techniques, and with a host of other parameters which affect the quality of the data. The archivist must retain any documentation relating to these matters to allow the user to appraise the quality of the data, and, thus, decide on its value for his research. For this omission and the other reason mentioned this paper is not recommended.

Statistical data, by the very nature of the statistics gathering process, are usually of a confidential nature. This results in involving producers and archivists in the politically sensitive question of privacy or confidentiality of information relating to individuals. The producers and archivists are consequently faced with the issue of maintaining the confidentiality of statistical data, and at the same time resolving the demands of legitimate researchers for access. This issue was discussed during the conference but the archivists were conspicuous by their absence of comment.

The paper by E.D. Godfield of the Bureau of the Census is a comprehensive statement of the Bureau's legal position, the rationale for this position and its concern for legitimate research needs. The central theme of the paper is the maintenance of confidentiality by denying

researchers access to confidential information to assure the quality of the statistical data. The "almost uniform willingness of individuals and firms to respond fully and accurately to censuses and surveys is based to an important degree upon their confidence that the individual data furnished by them will not be used for other than the statistical purposes for which they are provided." (page 41)

The users at the Conference offered no arguments against the Bureau's position except to request greater access to confidential data with the assurance that such access would not be abused. To fill the gap left by archivists, this reviewer concurs very strongly with the Bureau's stance. As archivists we are concerned with retaining archives for future use. The short term gains of allowing access to a few users would mean future losses to unnumerable others. This is not to be Machiavellian, but optimistic that with the passage of time either attitudes will change or confidential data will cease to be such.

This does not necessarily exclude statistical data from contemporary analysis by researchers. Machine readable statistical files are considerably more flexible than those in traditional formats. The machine readable format allows greater user access while maintaining confidentiality. Mr. Goldfield and O.G. Grelton of the Bureau describe techniques to this end. It must be pointed out that a machine readable format is not always a panacea for the issue of user access and confidentiality. Nor are the solutions easily and economically applied to statistical data in more traditional formats.

The major point of discussion for the Conference was the question of selection. M.H. Fishbein had general agreement on the criterion for determining the long term value of records. "It is the likelihood of use that determines preservation". (page 76). How do archivists determine "the likelihood of use"? Mr. Fishbein stated that the criteria "are value judgments, ... There is no science in knowing what people are going to be doing in the year 2000, ... All we can do is assess what has been done, the likelihood of that research continuing, the present trends of research, and the direction in which it is traveling." (page 132).

Mr. Fishbein and many archivists at the Conference seem to have both feet firmly planted in the present. The definition of the process or selection is valid, but does not go far enough. He has omitted the prediction or foreseeing of future areas of research that have not yet been attempted. Mr. Fishbein also reflected this attitude on the long standing question of assessing large volumes of records. "Statistical records ... are eventually going to reach tremendous proportions. ... The more we bury an archival institution in vast accumulations of data,

the less likelihood there is that such data can be used." (page 75) This is not a basis for deciding whether or not records have long term value. What Mr. Fishbein is admitting is the incapability of archives to carry out their responsibility when large volumes of records are involved. Archivists must not destroy records because they are too voluminous, or cannot be used in the present or foreseeable future.

These extraneous considerations have been allowed to influence archival selection for the past thirty years. They are problems but they are not directly related to selection. If they are allowed to influence archival selection records of long term value will be destroyed.

A considerable body of opinion at the Conference reacted to these attitudes. Some argued that technology will be the savior; for others, no. The question is impossible to resolve; only the future holds the answer. As one participant said "I err in the direction of having more faith in our ingenuity to store records economically than in our talents to foresee future needs." (page 223)

With selection the question was raised as to who should make the decision. Mr. Fishbein has stated with justification that this is the archivist's responsibility. (page 127) He also indicated that this did not exclude consulting with academics in certain instances to determine "probable use". He added that this was not asking "academicians to tell us whether to keep or throw away records." This was a recognition that present day archivists are less likely to have an appreciation of the long term value of records that have not been their traditional concern. After the Conference, an Archives Advisory Council of users and archivists was established to advise NARS on the selection of records and other questions of mutual interest.

The idea in holding conferences to have a "trialogue" among the producer, consumer and preserver of records is excellent. The book is worth reading from the archival viewpoint to have an appreciation of a selected sample of producers' and users' viewpoints on matters relating to archives. It is doubtful that the passage of five years since the Conference was held has changed these viewpoints.

My appraisal of the archival participation in the Conference is mixed. The Conference dealt with statistical data, a relatively new concern for archivists, and machine readable records, an even newer concern. Since the Conference was initiated and organized by archivists, in particular Mr. Fishbein, we can say they are the vanguard.

There is a difference, however, between a commitment of one's resources and time to such an endeavour and a commitment of one's will or soul. From the archival attitudes and beliefs expressed at the Conference I feel that there was an overall unwillingness to be in the vanguard of thinking in the area of archival principles and administrative practices. In many cases the Conference produced a repetition of well known and accepted statements of archival principles and practices. In other areas there was no response to the issue under consideration.

The only justification for this performance is mentioned by one of the archivists: "we all have a good deal to learn". (page 250) I had hoped the Conference would have included a good deal of seminal thinking on the new challenges that statistics and machine readable records are presenting to archives. None was obvious. I can only hope that as a result of the Conference and the publication of its papers and proceedings that seminal thinking will be generated.

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ARCHIVES PROCEDURAL MANUAL. Darryl Pololl.
St. Louis, Missouri, Washington University School
of Medicine Library, 1974. Pp. v, 118
\$(U.S.)5.00.

Having recently undertaken to write a 'manual' or 'guide' to archival procedures and practices for the Extension Office of the B.C. Provincial Museum, the reviewer welcomed the opportunity to review another archivist's efforts in this area of endeavour. When the Manual recently arrived, therefore, it was both a surprise and a disappointment.

In the "Preface", Dr. Brodman, Librarian and Professor of Medical History at Washington University, cautions that:

Although some of the directions and decisions refer to specific Washington University School of Medicine situations, most of them are of a general nature and ought to be useful to a larger group.

While it is true there are some excellent general 'rules' and theory in clear statements throughout the text, the bulk of the work is confined to Washington University Library School of Medicine archival procedures and