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# Meeting the Challenge of Contemporary Records: Does It Require a Role Change for the Archivist?

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## Abstract

Recent archival literature reflects a number of diverse definitions of the role of the archivist. Many older assessments stress a more cohesive definition: the need for archivists to be all to all archives, equally representing users and administrators, creators and researchers. The challenge created by contemporary records is not to change this fundamental role, first expressed over two hundred years ago during the French Revolution, but to create new ways to fulfill it. The task requires making three crucial distinctions: between the archivist's methods and the archival mission, between the archivist's work and archival functions, and between professional issues and archival science issues. Only by learning how to strike a balance between the needs of archivists as individuals and the collective identity of the archival profession can the challenges of contemporary records be met. An earlier version of this article was delivered on August 26, 1999, as the author's presidential address at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The theme of the 1999 Society of American Archivists' annual meeting is "Meeting the Challenge of Contemporary Records." Its choice and the conference's design are based on two fundamental assumptions. The first assumption is that contemporary records represent a challenge for *all* archivists, irrespective of their working environment, thereby constituting

an issue that unites all archivists and on which SAA can take leadership. The second assumption is that the challenge of contemporary records can only be met through an inter- and multidisciplinary international effort. This effort includes, among other things, the ongoing cooperation of records creators, preservers, and users; the joint involvement of educational institutions, all concerned professions, and archival institutions and programs in research projects; and the development of graduate and doctoral archival programs. The accomplishment of this effort, however, requires an archival profession that is confident in its role, has a strong sense of identity, and is able not only to present its own unique perspective and worldview to the worlds of research and administration, but also to contribute to the development of new knowledge using its own unique body of concepts and principles.

In other words, a conference like this serves us archivists as well as our colleagues from other professions only if we know who we are, how we fit into the puzzle, what we want to achieve from listening to each other's experiences, research endeavors, problems, and why certain perspectives are important to us.

When the Program Committee and I discussed the purposes of this conference and the ways of achieving them, I was under the impression that the archival profession was getting over its balkanization, stemming from the primacy of the working place's mission or the skill requirements of particular positions, and emphasizing the commonality of the profession's mission and body of knowledge. Bill Maher's 1998 presidential address on "our reasons to exist" seemed to emphasize ideas that were largely shared and accepted. We exist, he said, "to provide an authentic, comprehensive record that ensures accountability for our institutions and preservation of cultural heritage for our publics."<sup>1</sup> Surely there is no argument about recognizing this as our primary role—I thought. The debate has always been about methods rather than ultimate purpose. The improved original order of Brenneke, the documentation strategies of Samuels or Hackman, the macro-appraisal of Cook, even the continuum of the Australians have all been about how, not about why. Our mission is not up for discussion; every archivist agrees on what it is. This is what I believed then. Later, I picked up the most recent issues of the *American Archivist* and *Archivaria* and my certitude began to falter.

The fall 1998 issue of *Archivaria* opens with an article by Robert McIntosh, which discusses the "creative role" of the archivist in authoring the record. "As the author of the archival record," McIntosh states, "the archivist plays a critical role in the construction of our knowledge of the past and, its logical obverse, in creating silences—gaps in memory." He also observes that "the creative role of the archivist—authorship—encompasses the spectrum of archival functions," and "to acknowledge our authorship, our vital place in the creation of society's memory. This is the agenda for a modern archival science."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> William J. Maher, "Archives, Archivists, and Society," *American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998): 263.

<sup>2</sup> Robert McIntosh, "The Great War, Archives, and Modern Memory," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 2, 16, 20.

In the next article on the usefulness of Mintzenberg's theories on organizational configuration for the appraisal of the records of an organization, Victoria Lemieux works from the assumption that the archivist's role is to preserve evidence of how an organization functions on its own merit, a responsibility for which she does not think that we have proper instruments in our own body of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Finally, writing about the "total archives" concept in Canada, Laura Millar advocates that the role of the archivist should once more be the preservation of "a balanced documentary memory of . . . society—of all aspects of . . . society—so that future generations have a complete memory."<sup>4</sup>

The fall 1998 issue of the *American Archivist* opens with Bill Maher's presidential address, and also contains Linda Henry's passionate appeal to dismiss the new paradigm that sees archivists acting as "regulators, auditors, and 'internal consultants'" and to return to the archivist's traditional role.<sup>5</sup> Without going into further detail, one could say that every article written in the past year has explicitly or implicitly either put into question the mission of the archivist or argued for the archivist's traditional role, the nature of which does not seem to be very clear to anyone. I started wondering whether this is a new trend or something begun years ago that I had missed in my reading. Thus, I randomly picked up an older issue of another journal; it was the second issue of the 1995 volume of *Archival Issues*. The first article, by Richard Cox, starts out with the words "mission" and "identity" in the very first paragraph. I found this very worrisome. If one's mission and identity are generally known and accepted, one does not need to talk about them. However, I was reassured by Cox's confidence in what the archival mission is: "identification, preservation, and use of archival records on behalf of the institutions it [the archival profession] serves and society."<sup>6</sup> However, a few paragraphs later, Cox states, "the archival mission will always remain, but I am not altogether sure about whether archivists and their allies or archival programs as we know them will still be there."<sup>7</sup> He goes on to say, "archivists have often seemed unable to change their mission, layering one old mission and traditional function or activity after another even as the larger organizational context of their operations has changed."<sup>8</sup>

I then read the following article, written by Elsie Freeman Finch. Quoting Larry Hackman, she reminds us that the archivist's role is to "ensure the

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Lemieux, "Applying Mintzberg's Theories on Organizational Configuration To Archival Appraisal," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 32–85.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Millar, "Discharging Our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 139.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Henry, "Schellenberg in Cyberspace," *American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998): 321.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Cox, "Archives and Archivists in the Twenty-First Century: What Will We Become?" *Archival Issues* 20, no. 2 (1995): 98.

<sup>7</sup> Cox, "Archives and Archivists in the Twenty-First Century," 99.

<sup>8</sup> Cox, "Archives and Archivists in the Twenty-First Century," 106.

identification, preservation, and accessibility of archives for years to come.”<sup>9</sup> So far, so good. But later on she states that “the central function of archives management and staff today is the preservation and broadening of the program,” that “our basic function as archivists has changed from that of facilitator of research to preservers of program,” and that “support of all kinds for the continuation of the program is their [the archivists’] primary job. Not the records—the program.”<sup>10</sup> I stopped reading. Obviously, the question about the archivist’s role and identity has been an ongoing issue for some time and, unfortunately, an unsolved one. But is it linked to the challenge presented by contemporary records?

In order to answer this question, I looked at some very old archival literature, written before the electronic records era. I thought briefly about the reflections of Benedetto Croce, who, in 1916, wrote about “the poor scholars, archivists . . . truly innocuous and beneficial little animals. If they were extinct, the fertility of the fields of the spirit would be not just diminished but completely ruined, and it would be necessary to promote urgently the reintegration and increment of those coefficients of culture.”<sup>11</sup> The cultural component of the archivist’s role was very clear at that time and had been a stable component since the inception of the profession in the fourteenth century. Another component that has always been present is that of the preservation of memory. In 1972 Vittorio Stella wrote that regardless of the specific needs that the archives serves according to the phases of its life cycle, the preservation of memory is a constant purpose of the archivist.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, the only dramatic change that has ever occurred in the archivist’s role was brought about by the French Revolution. For the first time, the preservation of archives derived from a duty of the state towards its citizens, and this new figure of the *citoyen* determined the rise of new responsibilities for the archivist, who became also a guardian of the rights of the people as evidenced by the records.<sup>13</sup> In 1958 Leopoldo Sandri emphasized the fact that the relationship between the new role of the archivist and the traditional role of preservation of the documentary memory and culture of society is manifest in the recognition that the historical record originates and must be protected in the office of creation and that all users of the records are best served by the application of scientific standards to archival work.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Larry Hackman, “Strategies for Archival Advocacy Nationwide,” unpublished paper quoted in Elsie Freeman Finch, “Archival Advocacy: Reflections on Myths and Realities,” *Archival Issues* 20, no. 2 (1995): 116.

<sup>10</sup> Freeman Finch, “Archival Advocacy,” 117, 118.

<sup>11</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Bari, [1916] 1924, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Vittorio Stella, “La storiografia e l’archivistica, il lavoro d’archivio e l’archivista,” in *Antologia di scritti archivistici*, a cura di Romualdo Giuntella (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali. Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, 1985), 30, note 7.

<sup>13</sup> Leopoldo Sandri, “La storia degli archivi,” *Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato* 18 (1958): 113.

<sup>14</sup> Sandri, “La storia degli archivi,” 113.

If the archivist, focusing on the needs of the researchers, becomes detached from current archives, he divorces real life, renounces his responsibility as guardian of people's rights, loses contact with the experience of change, and gets lost in the multiple expressions of archival research.<sup>15</sup> If the archivist, focusing on the needs of the creator, becomes detached from the historical records, he divorces the life of the spirit, renounces his responsibility as guardian of society's memory and culture, loses contact with future generations, and gets lost in a myriad of administrative tasks.

If these responsibilities are instead looked at as an integrated whole, one can see that the unique role of the archivist is the preservation of the authentic recorded memory of society because of its destination to permanent public use. To fulfill this role (the old literature says), it is essential that the archivist be able to represent the world of the user to the administration and the world of administration to the user, to act as a mediator between creators and researchers, to be "all to all archives." In order to maintain the delicate balance between often opposite needs, the archivist must adhere to three essential distinctions:

1. the distinction between the archivist's methods and the archival mission;
2. the distinction between the archivist's work and archival functions; and
3. the distinction between professional issues and archival science issues.

The first distinction, that between methods and mission, is at the root of this entire discussion. The relationship between society and its institutions is constantly changing, and so is the way organizations function, the political and economical context in which we act, and the legal framework within which records are created and used. Technology and the media of records are in constant flux as well. Does this mean that the archivist's role is to change in order to deal with changing circumstances? I do not think so. At least, not in democratic societies. The illusion of a need for change derives from the ever-increasing complexity of the work, which often requires special and diverse skills, and from the constant shifting of emphasis from one side of the pendulum to the other, often because of factors external to the area of influence of the archivist.

What really needs to adjust to new conditions, however, is the way of fulfilling the archival role, the methods required by new circumstances. Contemporary records, just like the records contemporary to each and every era, challenge existing methods and stimulate rethinking and renewal. In my view, the archivist must still be all to all archives, but not the same archivist, I would hope. What the old saying means is that no archives, public or private, current or noncurrent, on paper or on tape, is out of our sphere of responsibility. But, note, it says "archives," that is, organic accumulations of records, not documents, sources, information, or data—only records—and I would think

<sup>15</sup> Oddo Bucci, "The Evolution of Archival Science and its Teaching at the University of Macerata," in *Archival Science on the Threshold of the Year 2000*, edited by Oddo Bucci (Macerata: Publications of the University of Macerata, 1992), 34–35.

that they are enough to fill the working day. Also, the expression “to be all to all archives” conveys additional implied messages.

One message is that the archivist must be neutral, objective, not driven by ideology or personal quests or missions. Vittorio Stella wrote in 1972 that the archivist is, in a way, an institutional researcher. His research is instrumental to the fulfillment of his responsibilities and is guided by the needs of his organization (be it a business or an archival institution), by the circumstances of his work and by the nature and characteristics of the material entrusted to him.<sup>16</sup> Of course, to aim at objectivity does not mean that one can achieve it, but only that one must strive for it. There is no doubt that the memory of future generations is shaped by the selections we make, by the descriptions we do not write, and by the kind of reference service that we offer. But it is essential that a specific intentionality stays out of it. In other words, the creative act of the archivist, to use McIntosh’s words, should remain as involuntary as possible, although well-documented. Another message is that, as Barbara Craig once put it, we do indeed serve the records and by serving the records we also serve every potential user, our organization, and the profession, as well as society and the future. If we did not primarily serve the records, no other user could be served but the present and immediate one, and no program could be maintained other than a very short-term one.

The second distinction archivists must keep in mind, that between the work of the archivist and archival functions, is the most relevant to this conference. The common area may be very large, but it is clear that archivists carry out functions that are not archival in nature, and that several archival functions are the competency of other professionals.<sup>17</sup> For example, archivists act as managers of people and resources of all kinds, as conservators, statisticians, or database designers. This does not mean that the archival role has changed anymore than the fact that librarians are entrusted with functions of record classification and scheduling, records managers with appraisal of records for permanent preservation, or historians with the writing of archival guides means that their professional roles have changed. It does not mean either that the competencies linked to each given job must be rearranged according to functional/disciplinary lines. It simply means that professions that share several common competencies because of the requirements of individual workplaces must share the pertinent body of knowledge. Archival functions remain archival functions whoever carries them out; therefore, they must be carried out according to archival theory, methods, and standards.

I feel very strongly about this, especially when it comes to the functions affecting the first part of the records life-cycle. In an article published in 1998

<sup>16</sup> Stella, “La storiografia e l’archivistica,” 34.

<sup>17</sup> Stella, “La storiografia e l’archivistica,” 32.

in the Irish *Records Management Journal*, Michael Pemberton writes that “the body of knowledge for records management remains poorly defined,” and that its “theoretical roots . . . lie in information science, cognitive science, system sciences.”<sup>18</sup> I could not disagree more with these statements. I believe that records managers and archivists need the same body of knowledge to carry out all functions affecting the records, that is, all archival functions. It is with regard to the non-archival functions that must accompany and complement the archival ones that they are required to have different knowledge, the type of which largely depends on the workplace. These non-archival functions which fill so much of the archivist’s and records manager’s day are mostly core functions of the allied professions whose members have joined us at this meeting—librarians, computer scientists, information technology experts, knowledge engineers, lawyers, auditors, historians, conservators, business administrators, and cultural operators of all kinds. This is the reason why we need to build strong alliances with these professions through our respective associations, as well as individually and through our organizations. One effective and increasingly necessary way of building individual partnerships that will result over time in larger alliances involving associations, industry, and government entities is the development of inter- and multidisciplinary research projects, some of which will be presented in the course of this conference. However, it is essential to remember that an alliance is very different from a merger and, in a way, it is quite the opposite. It presupposes the existence of distinct identities, diverse roles and purposes, and the willingness to foster common outcomes for the advancement of different but complementary interests. Even when these interests concern social values, it is important to keep distinct the various professional and disciplinary perspectives.

The third distinction archivists must consider, that between professional issues and archival science issues, is one that has created much confusion about the responsibilities of a professional association such as the Society of American Archivists. Professional issues include concerns of broad scope, such as education, ethics, advocacy, recruitment to the field, or compensation. Archival science issues include scientific concerns such as the concept of record, appraisal methods, or technical standards, the endorsement and distribution of which is, however, a professional concern. Archival science issues are the primary responsibility of archival researchers, be they educators, practitioners, doctoral students, or a combination thereof; while professional issues are the responsibility of the professional association. The SAA Council respected this important distinction when it began to develop the new strategic plan for the Society. Its goals in the spheres of education, membership, political leadership, publishing, external networking, and standards reflect SAA’s priorities. I am confident that

<sup>18</sup> Michael Pemberton, “Records Management: Confronting Our Professional Issues,” *Records Management Journal* 8 (December 1998): 9.

their development into specific objectives will help us to avoid the many ambiguities and dichotomies that have hurt the Society in the past: graduate *versus* continuing education, manuscript curators *versus* government archivists, cultural roles *versus* administrative ones, researchers *versus* creators, archivists *versus* the other members, etc. All the “*versus*” will easily become “and” if the identification of the objectives for each goal will be based on respect for the three essential distinctions I have outlined today, between methods and mission, work and archival functions, and professional issues and archival science issues.

Tom Nesmith, a Canadian archival educator, once wrote that what we need to know collectively as a profession is very different from what one needs to know individually as a professional. The archival profession shares a common body of knowledge and on that foundation each individual builds special knowledge and skills.<sup>19</sup> I believe that the same is true with regard to the role of the archivist. The role of the archival profession in democratic societies has not changed since the French Revolution: archivists must still be all to all archives for the purpose of preserving the authentic record of their time for the generations to come. However, individual archivists are called to different responsibilities according to the context in which they work. While they must never forget their ultimate mission, they may need to use different methods and very diverse sets of skills to carry out their own specific archival functions, and they may require the knowledge, methods, and skills of other disciplines to carry out other supporting functions.

The work of a professional association like the Society of American Archivists is successful in ensuring the well-being of the archival profession only when it is able to nurture its unique collective identity while at the same time satisfying the diverse needs of its individual members; it is a very difficult balancing act, one that SAA is striving to accomplish not only through conferences like this one, but also through its education program and several short- and long-term initiatives outlined in its forthcoming strategic plan. Meeting the challenges of contemporary records is no mean undertaking, so let’s do away with the words, and let’s get down to it.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Nesmith, “‘Professional Education in the Most Expansive Sense’: What Will the Archivist Need to Know in the Twenty-First Century?” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 92.