

SPRING NEW ENGLAND ARCHIVISTS MEETING
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“Upon this gifted age...”

Convergence is a wonderful word. It not only means moving toward a common point, but also, in math, can mean limits. In natural science, convergence describes a form of evolution. I think the program committee has done an excellent job of providing glimpses of all three meanings.

I have thought a lot about convergence, but let me digress for a moment.

Recently I was down to the legislature to testify. As I walked back to the office, wrapped in my bureaucratic disguise of coat and tie, a pick-up truck approached. The driver yelled out the window, “You blankety-blank hippie!”

I was instantly charmed. My hairline crept back into the same zip code as my eyebrows. The gray disappeared from my beard. And, with a significant intake of breath, I regained a vaguely humanoid body configuration.

The context, of course, was a series of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations in Montpelier, inspired by world events. Within that context, this drive-by hooting immediately returned me to my youth. But the moment quickly passed. I had to exhale.

What struck me, what continues to strike me, is how quickly we reverted to the rhetoric of an earlier time. Conducting civic, or civil, dialogue in time of war is difficult; it may be one of the most difficult things an open society confronts. To what degree do we suspend dialogues, or dissent, during a war? How far does that deference of debate extend? Does it embrace domestic, as well as foreign, policy?

I am also struck by the lack of context to these dialogues. One recent letter to the editor, written prior to the war, expressed support for President Bush. The writer argued that if President Bush “was in such a big hurry to go to war he would have started right after September 11[th].”¹

If we can so quickly forget Afghanistan, what do we recall of the other incursions of the last twenty years, including Panama, Lebanon, Grenada, Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, and Iraq I? More importantly, what do we know about the consequences of those incursions? Can we now evaluate the

arguments originally made for or against each? Answering those questions seems, to me, essential to an informed policy discussion.

Okay what does this have to do with convergence, or archives for that matter? I think a lot, based on three assumptions. The first is that society, despite our best efforts, continues to hold no opinion, or even a negative opinion, about the roles of archives and archivists. Second, I do not believe we fully understand the scope of change brought by new information and communication technologies. Are we fully utilizing opportunities provided by those technologies to enhance perceptions of our profession or use of our records? Finally, I think the records we collectively care for can inform ongoing public dialogues.

I suspect there is general agreement on the first assumption. Despite numerous sessions on archives and society, outreach, or advocacy, there remains a broad lack of awareness about records and archival management. When an opinion has been formed, it is generally negative. We are still the “dark and dusty” archives of the popular imagination.

Periodic surveys bear this out. Rick Barry conducted an international survey on archives and society in November 2002². The survey was primarily directed to archives and record managers, but also included students, journalists, academic researchers and others. Of the 671 responses, 70% felt that society in general had formed little or no opinion of the record and archives professions. Twenty-one per cent felt that society had a poor perception of the record communities. Only 9% felt there were positive perceptions.

Rick wrote: “Where it is seen as having an opinion, society values records mainly for their genealogical, historical, cultural and secondary information and research content...and much less so for the loftier values that professionals typically consider of importance to civil society: protection of human rights; creating and maintaining public confidence in government; enabling government by rule of law; and promoting democracy through public accountability of its public officials.”³

Such data is supported by anecdote. On March 26, 2003 the New York Times reported on President Bush’s executive order extending closure of certain records and putting the Vice-President in charge of declassifying documents. The story repeatedly referred to the reaction of historians and “critics of government secrecy.” Despite the public positions taken by our professional organizations and colleagues there was no mention of concern within the record communities.⁴

I should pause to note that Rick’s survey included “good news” stories on innovative programs that may improve public perceptions. One of

the good news stories was the New England Archivists' Archives on the Road series. Congratulations.

My second assumption is that we have not fully comprehended the scope of change brought by new information and communication technologies. Neil Postman has argued that “technological change is not additive; it is ecological...A new medium does not add something; it changes everything. In the year 1500, after the printing press was invented, you did not have old Europe plus the printing press. You had a different Europe. After television, America was not America plus television. Television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry, and so on.”⁵

I think we can agree that what we have now is more than the world, plus computers. But what do we know about the ecological changes computers are bringing to our profession? Yes, we have responded to new technologies in many wonderful ways. But these responses tend to fall within our traditional appraisal, processing, and preservation work.

Do we understand how computers and the Internet are changing our interactions with users; with our visibility within society? Certainly more and more users have unmediated access to our holdings, or at least what we have made available on-line. By unmediated I mean traditional and new users no longer approach our collections through personal contact with archivists or through the interpretations of academic researchers. They visit archival web sites, not archivists or archives. In addition faster and more refined search engines expand our potential users, while narrowing their views of our collections. As web users gain greater power to filter what they see, what will become of the unplanned, unanticipated encounters that can be the essence of research? Finally, the Internet's demand for images over text is, arguably, changing what collections we choose to put on-line as well as popular expectations of what we provide and do.⁶

Certainly a major change is the deluge of undifferentiated information provided without context or connection to our personal, professional and social activities. Again, Postman: “The tie between information and action has been severed...[O]ur defenses against information glut have broken down; our information immune system is inoperable. We don't know how to filter it out; we don't know how to reduce it; we don't know how to use it.”⁷

Several respondents to Rick Barry's survey echoed Postman's point. As one wrote, “Maybe one reason we are perceived badly, if at all, is because we aren't connecting to people's actual needs.”⁸

A very informal review of New England web sites suggests we are using these technologies to reach established user groups—genealogists,

Civil War buffs, and academic researchers, for example—rather than seeking to reach new audiences in new ways.

My final assumption is that the records we preserve can help inform public dialogues and decision making. And here, at last, are the convergences I am interested in. These are the convergence among records, information, and knowledge and the convergence between archives and society. Let me resort to poetry to explain. Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote a sonnet that reads, in part:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Falls from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts...they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric...”⁹

Should, could, we become weavers of these unquestioned, uncombined facts? By this I do not mean providing more or faster access to our holdings. Rather I mean gaining a better understanding of what record-based information or knowledge, in what form, is most useful to our institutions or our societies.

We like to say we preserve records of continuing value. We need to ask, “valuable to whom, why, and how?”

This touches on an effort by the Vermont State Archives, which was also identified as a “good news” story in Rick Barry’s survey. We knew we held records of value that could inform public dialogues. But experience confirmed that no legislator, government official or reporter had the time, training, or expertise to visit the Archives to conduct original research. This observation held true regardless of how many finding aids we made available on-line or otherwise. If our institution never used our records, how could we argue that we had an important institutional role?

We began to link “records of continuing value” to the idea that there were “continuing issues.” That is, each generation has to address, within its social expectations and fiscal realities, certain core issues. Each generation has debated public health, taxation, education, economic development, environmental protection, or crime and punishment. Each generation has had to determine the extend of civil liberties and dissent, or the boundaries between the “freedom to” and “freedom from.”

We also believe that information/records are most valuable when they are linked to action. So we tracked current and pending legislation and followed news reports on emerging issues. We communicated with key

officials about what they saw as upcoming issues. We then tried to match that information with our holdings.

Again, understanding our audience, we knew that simply throwing reams of records at an official would probably be no more effective than giving them a finding aid. So we distill the information into summaries and brief overviews. We then provide selected records that support those summaries.

For example, 2003 is a year in which the state senate can propose amendments to the Vermont Constitution. Therefore we put together an overview of the amendment process. We created a summary of all proposals, whether ratified or not, since 1880. That summary identified the most common categories of proposals. We then provided links to each proposal, including what happened to it. We are currently putting together legislative committee minutes containing the deliberations on each proposal.

The nice thing about continuing issues is they continue. For example one of the first proposals of 2003 called for extending terms of office. We let the sponsors know that 10% of all proposals since 1880 addressed that issue. We provided the language of each proposal, noting that only one made it to a popular vote (and it was defeated).

Obviously this information does not tell a legislator what to do; but it does provide context that can guide deliberations. It demonstrates how records can be an institutional resource. It is information that is directly linked to an action—in this case debating and voting constitutional amendments. It is a direct personal contact that forcibly highlights the Archives as a service.

Continuing issues is a multi-faceted approach. It is not all web-based. In some cases we simply send, unsolicited, a particularly information-rich record or records to a legislative committee or government official. We are also experimenting with continuing issues as a dialectic teaching tool on public decision making. We have tested it in schools and with professional organizations.

The web site is, however, key. Every legislative committee room, every government office, is connected to the Internet. Government officials now access information from their desks.

The Internet, of course, reaches more than the Vermont Statehouse. Citizens, academic researchers and reporters can access the information as well. We make special efforts to inform reporters whenever we add a new section, or when we know we have context for a breaking story.¹⁰

Identifying key audiences is important. Simply trying to change society's perceptions of archives is too vague a goal. Even within target

audiences we primarily focus on a handful of legislators, gubernatorial staff, and reporters. If those select audiences have good experiences working with us, and broadcast that success, we may eventually reach a tipping point that can change perceptions of the broader society.

Continuing issues is labor intensive. It is not risk free, particularly in a political environment. But, to date, I would argue “continuing issues” has been a success. For the last three biennia we have been invited to be part of the orientation of new legislators. There are now several legislative committees that regularly ask us for background information. Vermont news reports routinely reference the Archives or our records. And this year the legislature consolidated archival management under the Archives and gave us the statutory authority to work with all government agencies.

I speak from the perspective of a public archives. But I think “continuing issues” can apply to other repositories as well. For those in academic institutions, for example, would a “continuing issue” on admissions policy be useful? Could it provide context for policy discussions on affirmative action?

In our case, we hope to eventually develop partnerships with other repositories. Certainly I, for one, would be uneasy about a presentation on civil liberties that relied exclusively on government records. The keys are: gain an understanding of issues of concern in your communities; identify the key players in those issues; and understand what information, in what form, best supports their decision making processes.

Continuing issues is only one model. There are other noteworthy models emerging as well. I understand, and to a degree share, professional concerns about a more activist approach. But we have always been activists. Our mission statements, collecting policies, appraisal practices, and finding aids all determine what records are preserved, in what manner, and for what audiences. So do our decisions about what we post on-line.

So let me go back to convergence and the absence of archivists from the crucial debates currently unfolding in our country. The convergence I think we must focus on is between the knowledge we preserve and our society. Within our vaults are centuries-long dialogues about the nature and limits of dissent; about the impact of, and responses to, epidemics; about the changing nature of New England communities; or about our evolving awareness of the environment. There is a desperate need for better sharing that knowledge and the context it provides. Informed dialogue is the essence of our democratic society. Who better to provide the tools for that dialogue than those who claim to hold society’s most valuable records?

I sometimes wonder whether we focus too much on how to preserve records, without adequately explaining why? I sometimes fear we spend too much time surveying archivists and not our parent institutions or society. I sometimes despair that we continue to create Civil War web sites, but none on civil liberties or civic discourse.

Let me borrow an ending from Terry Cook. “What intentions and desires do we archivists have? That question is essentially cultural...’[W]e must think of archives as active, not passive, as sites of power, not as recorders of power. Archives don’t simply **record** the work of culture; they **do** the work of culture.’”¹¹ Thank you.

¹ The Barre-Montpelier Time-Argus, February 27, 2003, page A7.

² Report on the Society and Archives Survey by Richard Barry, January 29m 2003, <http://mybestdocs.com>

³ Report on the Society and Archives Survey, page 11. As an example of how we articulate those “loftier” values see the April 1, 2003 “Statement on the Importance of Supporting State Archival Programs,” issued by the Society of American Archivists.

⁴ New York Times, March 26, 2003, page A14

⁵ Neil Postman, “Five Things We Need to Know About Technological Change,” paper delivered in Denver, Colorado on March 27, 1998 available at: <http://itrs.scu.edu/tshanks/pages/Comm12/12Postman.htm>.

⁶ For example, Connecticut History On-Line is a wonderful cooperative project involving the Connecticut Historical Society, the University of Connecticut, and Mystic Seaport. Their web site contains over 14,000 photographs. Most repository web sites I visited for this paper, including the Vermont State Archives’ site, offered significant photograph presentations. But are photographs, history? What will the emphasis on photograph collections mean in terms of popular expectations of “archives” or “history,” as well as our own use of texts?

For a summary of one impact of the growing consumer use of filters see Cass Sunstein, *republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Sunstein discusses “the neighborhood of me” and individualized search engines, collaborative filtering, and other emerging web tools that narrow the range of information one is exposed to on the web. His concern is the impact on public forums and public dialogue.

⁷ Neal Postman, “Informing Ourselves to Death,” an address to the German Informatics Society, October 11, 1990 available at <http://world.std.com/~jimf/informing.html>. For a more complete view of Postman’s perspective see his *Technopoly* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

⁸ Report on the Society and Archives Survey, page 49.

⁹ Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sonnet (“Upon this age, which never speaks its mind...”).

¹⁰ I want to emphasize that these contacts are rarely about “news from the archives” (recent acquisitions, processed collections, etc). Rather they are to offer archives-based background on a current issue or debate. The goal is to demonstrate to reporters how the Archives can be a resource and thus build an important partnership. We, of course, hope that if our material is used the story will include a statement to the effect, “according to records at the Archives...”

¹¹ Terry Cook, “Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage,” paper delivered at the Australian Society of Archivists Conference, August 18, 2000, available, under “guest authors, at <http://mybestdocs.com>. The internal quote is from Steven Lubar of the Smithsonian.