

The Power of Archives: Archivists' Values and Value in the Post-Modern Age¹

Introduction

In 1985, my first year in my first permanent archives position, I attended my grandfather's 85th birthday party. In attendance were many relatives, of course, and one distant cousin, an elderly deaf gentleman who was an expert at reading lips, asked me what I did for a living. I faced him so that he could see my lips, and said "I am an archivist." He blinked and looked back at me. "A what?" he asked. "I am an archivist," I repeated, "an archivist." He looked blankly and said he had no idea what I was saying. It was a word he had never encountered before, and could not "read" it on my lips. This was not an auspicious start to my encounters with relatives that occasion, none of whom it turned out had ever heard of an archivist. I immediately fell back on this simple but misleading explanation: "I'm a cross between a librarian and a historian." This seemed to satisfy my cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandfather.

But of course it was not particularly satisfying for me. I soon changed the short explanation of archivist to someone who "identified, appraised, preserved, arranged, described, and provided access to historical material." But over the years I have become more and more dissatisfied with this litany of our tasks. As I have suggested on past occasions, one of our profession's weaknesses is that we tend to focus too much on our processes and not enough on our purpose. How many of us, when asked what an archivist is, retreat to reciting our core functions? This list is apt to reinforce a public perception that archivists are functionaries, concerned with "doing things" rather than with why they're done. As John Fleckner has recently admonished, "Our attention must go beyond 'how we do archives work' to 'why we are doing it.'"²

In my early years as a professional I was too consumed with those daily tasks to give much thought to why I was doing them. I was not alone. A 1984 report to SAA by a professor of marketing, looking at resource allocators' perceptions of archivists, found that few saw archives as important enough to fight budget battles for, and this, the report concluded, was largely due to archivists' inability or unwillingness to define and promote themselves. Archivists, the report noted, were perceived to have some worth but no power: higher level administrators saw archivists as having "the impotence of virtue, which is expected to be its own reward...."³ In summarizing the report, SAA's Task Force on Archives and Society noted: "Archivists are viewed as quiet professionals, carrying out an admired but practically frivolous activity.... Unfortunately, archivists have not disabused them of their misconceptions."⁴

In a related article, then president David Gracy concluded, "Is there any doubt that the most basic, if not the first, step we must take in changing the public's image of us is changing our own

¹ This address has benefited immensely from the creative and considered review of several friends and colleagues. Needless to say none of them are responsible for the end product, but I do want to acknowledge their generous and substantial assistance to making this paper better than it started out to be: Elizabeth Adkins, Nancy Beaumont, Frank Boles, Tom Hyry, Kathy Marquis, and Joel Wurl.

² John A. Fleckner, "The Last Revolution and the Next," *Journal of Archival Organization* 2(1/2) 2004, 16.

³ Sidney J. Levy and Albert G. Robles, "The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators Perceptions" (1984), iii.

⁴ "Archivists' Resource Allocators: The Next Step," December 1985, pp. 1-2.

impression of ourselves and thus the image we project?”⁵ Defining ourselves in terms other than what we do each morning speaks to our ultimate ability to communicate our value to resource allocators, to find a suitable and sustainable place for ourselves in this information age, and to define and assert our power as a profession.

Archival Power

Yes, power. Not a word we frequently associate with our profession, particularly outside government archives (and even rarely then). But “the distinctive roles and specialized skills of professionals confer considerable power,” according to one sociologist of occupations.⁶ And in a presentation to an institute of senior academic librarians, Harvard Librarian Robert Darnton recounted an anecdote of one of his associate librarians, who, upon being asked “What’s it like to be a Librarian?”, had taken to answering: “it’s all about money and power.” And so it is with us, though one might hardly know it by eavesdropping on our conversations or reading our articles.

How do we claim and exercise power? When we seek resources, we cannot continue to behave as if we “deserve” resources and recognition because we are meritorious; that is we do good work. Of course we must do good work, but we have to actively seek resources and recognition, and that is done by exercising the tools of professional power—at whatever hierarchical level one happens to reside.⁷ All of us should demand, cajole, finagle, bargain, collect points, win friends, influence people, and in general do whatever it takes to build and exercise power for our programs. This is, of course, part of an overall goal of replacing the image of the lab-coated, dust-coated, withdrawn and quiet archivist preciousizing over “old stuff” in dead storage with an image (and self-image) of a confident, articulate, savvy professional.

“Archivists need to translate their importance into more power,” said the 1984 report.⁸ How do we do that? The answer is two-fold. First archivists must recognize that power is grounded in our values. **Values** are the embodiment of what an organization stands for, and should be the basis for the behavior of its members. The problem with this argument is, of course, that before it can be put into play archivists must define our values. Second archivists must recognize and exercise our power. In considering this matter I have concluded that although power flows from values it is sometimes most useful and least complicated to discuss values and power together, because they are often intertwined.

Archival Values

Ultimately, then, I see the answer, or at least an answer, to the questions “Who are we; why are we here, and how can we do what we need to do” in a definition of our core values. What *are* our common set of values? We have had many attempts to identify some values or other, but so

⁵ David B. Gracy III, “What’s Your Totem? Archival Images in the Public Mind,” *Midwestern Archivist* 10 (1985), 19.

⁶ Rudi Volti, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Work and Occupations* (Pine Forge, 2008), 99.

⁷ See Bruce Dearstyne, ed., *Leading and Managing Archives and Records Programs: Strategies for Success* (Neal Schumann, 2008), and particularly the chapters by Mark A. Greene, “Trying to Lead from Good to Great and Reflections on Leadership at All Levels, pp. 137-62, and Leon J. Stout, “Leading from the Middle: Building a University Archives,” pp. 243-67.

⁸ Levy, “The Image of Archivists,” iv.

far as I know there has not been an attempt to do what the ALA has done, and formally define “core values” of the profession.⁹ Let me start the conversation by laying out what I think they are and ought to be, not in any formal order:

- 1) Professionalism
- 2) Collectivity
- 3) Activism
- 4) Selection
- 5) Preservation
- 6) Democracy
- 7) Service
- 8) Diversity
- 9) Use and Access
- 10) History

Let me take some time with each of them, apologizing in advance for the cursory nature of my analysis because of the amount of time I have here.

Professionalism. Perhaps it should go without saying that archivists should have the characteristics of professionals, though there has been much discussion about whether we meet the qualifications of a profession. I strongly believe we do, but that we do not always act as if we believe ourselves to be professionals.

One of the most salient features of a profession, according to one author, is that its practice “is based on specialized knowledge”; not “knowledge that is intuitive, informal, and cookbooky”—“a professional’s knowledge is deeper and more sophisticated than that of an ordinary worker [and] it is supposed to be grounded in well-established theories and conceptual schemes that give intellectual coherence to specific facts and procedures.”¹⁰ Sadly, not all archivists take this professional need seriously. We see an awful lot of “intuitive, informal, and cookbooky” knowledge being exchanged on our listserv and presented in our sessions—the ubiquitous “this is how we done it good” papers.

What I want to focus on are the professional characteristics of internalizing a common set of values (which is the overarching theme of this entire address), defining our importance, and claiming power, all three identified as crucial by sociologists of work. To a certain extent our importance lies with our set of values, but of course those values must be communicated, always reached for, and when necessary explained. Beyond that, however, our importance lies in much broader, deeper assertions of relevance to society. These will never be such that they vault us to importance equal to doctors and lawyers, or even the engineers who design the dwellings we live and work in, but we have to begin to rally around definitions of “why we are here” that mean something to non-professionals.

⁹ www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/corevaluesstatement/corevalues.htm “The foundation of modern librarianship rests on an essential set of core values that define, inform, and guide our professional practice. These values reflect the history and ongoing development of the profession and have been advanced, expanded, and refined by numerous policy statements of the American Library Association.”

¹⁰ Rudi Volti, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Work and Occupations* (Pine Forge, 2008), 98.

As Rand Jimerson stated, “we can overcome the public’s lack of knowledge and understanding about archives. We can explain why archives are essential in modern society.”¹¹ Examples could be esoteric, such as “our work is a reaffirmation of the value of human life and a celebration of the human spirit,” which is a nice phrase turned by Maygene Daniels.¹² Or they could be more prosaic, such as explaining the concrete uses to which archives of all kinds can and have been put—from asking what would Ken Burns’ *Civil War* documentary be without archival sources to showing the continual importance of land records. We should have a broad range of examples in our arsenal, both for archives in general and for our particular institutions.

Collectivity. I use this term to signify the importance both of context and of aggregation in how we view the world. Archivists value aggregations of material—record groups, collections, series, fonds. We have developed descriptive tools designed to work with aggregates. We believe that aggregation is both an essential reflection of the organic nature of recordkeeping, and a recognition that context matters in fully understanding individual items. This should go without saying except that our digitization mania has reinforced a longstanding contradictory fascination with individual items. There is no reason for this to be so; repositories as diverse as the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art have amply demonstrated the utility and efficiency of mass-digitization and aggregate metadata in digitization programs, and while at NHPRC Max Evans called for the very same orientation.¹³

With Dennis Meissner I have beaten half to death the horse of shunning focus on individual items in paper form, and in an upcoming article I will argue the same for electronic records. A relentless focus on the aggregate is part of what sets us apart from librarians and museum curators in the cultural heritage business. Collectivity goes beyond the material within a collection, and should encompass, for example, the way we approach collecting (or acquiring) as a whole. We should be making acquisition decisions based not on one-off “this looks interesting” decisions but on well-planned policies that approach the documentation universe broadly. We should be seeking documentation that builds upon itself, collections and record-groups that inter-relate, and description approaches that help to make these interrelationships clearer to our users

Our ability to work in the aggregate is also an important source of our power. While other cultural professionals struggle with the mass of individual items before them and require vast budgets to undertake their missions, consider for example the various projects to publish the papers of the founding fathers, archivists offer an alternative path; a path that many resource allocators will in many cases see as an attractive alternative to item level work; a path that through our values leads to power. Collectivity is also a key source of power when it applies to how we treat colleagues, sister institutions, and allied professions. There is strength, of course,

¹¹ Rand Jimerson, President’s Message “Archival Stories,” *AO*, Jan/Feb 05.

¹² Maygene Daniels, “On Being an Archivist,” 1995, <http://www.archivists.org/governance/presidential/daniels.asp>

¹³ Joshua Ranger, “More Bytes, Less Bite: Cutting Corners in Digitization,” unpublished paper presented at the fall 2006 Midwest Archives Conference symposium,

http://www.midwestarchives.org/2006_Fall/presentations/Ranger%20Omahapresentationranger.doc; Archives of American Art at <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collectionsonline/>;

Max J. Evans, “The Archival Time Machine: A Closet Engineer Looks at Our Profession,” *NEA Newsletter* 31:1 (Jan 2004), p. 8.

in numbers—while there is advantage to a certain degree of diffusion, such as the sections and roundtables of SAA, taking advantage of common interests (or regionals taking advantage of common geography) fracturing into smaller and smaller organizations based on subsets of archival functions, institutions, or formats endangers the entire archival enterprise. There is also power in strategic alliances. If we are clear enough about our own identity we need never fear being confused with or subsumed by related professions.

Activism. I see activism as having three distinct components: first, what I would call “agency”—our active shaping of the historical record; second, advocacy of archival issues and values in a variety of settings including the political arena; and third, what Howard Zinn referred to as “activist archivists,” or our deliberate decisions to give voice to the otherwise underdocumented individuals and communities in our midst.

Our values include a recognition, acceptance, and deliberate application of our own agency in the work we do with records and users. This simply means that we are not neutral or objective¹⁴ protectors and transmitters of primary sources, but shapers and interpreters of the sources as well. Archivists have to understand, accept, and work within the reality that we—through our selection, through our description, and even through our marketing—do as much to create the documentation of the past as the individuals and organizations that generated the records in the first place.¹⁵

My first point under activism was agency; my second is advocacy. We must more consistently project our strong belief in the importance of what we do and why we do it. In other words, we must steadily and staunchly advocate for ourselves and our values. We need to do that as individuals, certainly, such as in the recurrently successful campaigns to convince Congress to reinstate funding for NHPRC. But we also must each—and for each of our institutions—find other, consistent, grass roots methods of promoting and advancing the mission of archives (or of your individual archives).

We need to pursue advocacy through our organizations when it counts,—from testifying to Congress on the Presidential Records Act to presenting our position on copyright to the Library of Congress, from urging a US District Court to ensure preservation of records relating to Guantanamo detainees. These are activities that can only be undertaken successfully by organizations, and usually by national organizations with the power of combined membership

¹⁴ Some incisive commentators, such as Rand Jimerson, have suggested that archivists should strive for objectivity but not neutrality. I believe we should strive for both while realizing we can attain neither. Rand Jimerson, “Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice,” *American Archivist* 70:2 (2007), pp. 270-72.

¹⁵ For example, Fran Blouin has written that archivists “will need to become much more aware of our role as mediators, that is, mediators between records creators and records repositories, between archives and users, between conceptions of the past and extant documentation.” Francis X. Blouin, “Archivists, Mediation, and the Constructs of Social Memory,” *Archival Issues* 24:2 (1999): 111. Others outside the archives profession have noted the importance of our mediating role. “[Your discipline] is about appraising and keeping records of history-making events and the acts spoken by history-makers, and doing that in a way that allows you to be effective *partners* for those history-makers in their re-membering of the past.” Chauncey Bell, “Re-membering the Past: Organizational Change: What is it, and what does it mean for records professionals?” Keynote address to the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Government Archivists and Records Administrators Sacramento, California July 17, 1997 (emphasis added), on the web at <<http://208.192.202.31/rbarry/nagara1.html>>. Bell was at the time Senior Vice President of Business Design Associates.

behind them. But advocacy like this comes at a cost, both in time and money. Advocacy must be part of our professional priorities, and members should be willing to support this work with effort and with dues, as Frank Boles will discuss further in his address on Saturday. It is also a most obvious exercise in power.

My third point under activism is that I believe that as a profession—though not always as individual practitioners—we must embrace the importance of deliberately acting to identify (even create), acquire, preserve, and make accessible material documenting those whose voices in our institutions and in society are marginalized or overlooked. This is part of our commitment to the value of diversity, but it is also a commitment to the more abstract notion of trying to ensure documentation that reflects the true complexity of our target institutions or collecting areas. This value includes building connections to those underdocumented communities;¹⁶

We are only beginning to discuss many difficult issues in working with these communities, such as cultural imperialism, but articles such as Joel Wurl's "Ethnicity as Provenance,"¹⁷ and documents such as the *Protocols for Native American Archival Material* make clear our need to address seriously this concern. It is also, however, a source of power through our ability to expand what we do and how we serve our institutions.

Selection. One archivist has written that "The appraisal process determines the fate of our documentary heritage and thereby contains perhaps the only socially significant element of archival power."¹⁸ This is a function archivists perform, but it is also one of our values insofar as why we perform it. Archivists select because we affirm the necessity of such appraisal and our professional ability to do it thoughtfully and defensibly (though not objectively and scientifically). Our institutions and society, we argue, are best served if presented a professional selection of primary sources rather than attempting to retain the totality of such sources. We preserve material because the material is important. Archivists are important, and exercise power, because archivists are the professionals best educated to make this selection.

Yet we frequently undermine this source of power. It is the combined fear of making mistakes, of discarding a series that is 99% junk and discovering (somehow) later that it contained one fairly interesting and substantive item, and the holdover conviction that archivists are custodians rather than active agents in the process of preserving material, that causes many of us to relegate selection to the slow, painstaking, item-level activity that it often becomes. When we avoid doing appraisal when it should be done, at the point of acquisition, and only grudgingly do it during processing, we are left, with the question about appraisal Gerry Ham posed to the profession more than 30 years ago, "Why must we do it so badly?"¹⁹

When, perhaps if, we surmount our fears and our custodial heritage, the path to doing appraisal better, is a relatively simple task. As with processing we must accept that the size of modern

¹⁶ Mark A. Greene, "Expanding the Community Connection in Minnesota," *Provenance* 17 (1999), 53-66.

¹⁷ Joel Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience," *Archival Issues*, 29:1 (2005), pp. 65-76. *Protocols* are at <http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/protocols.html>

¹⁸ Roy C. Schaeffer, "Transcendent Concepts: Power, Appraisal, and the Archivist as Social Outcast," *American Archivist* 55 (1992), 609.

¹⁹ F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* (January 1975), p. 5.

collections is simply too great to permit the luxury of item—and even often file—level appraisal. We must accept that we cannot afford to be 100% certain that no document that might possibly be of value to someone is discarded. As Ham noted fifteen years ago, “today’s information-laden world has lessened the value of any single set of records; the documents may be unique but the information is usually not.”²⁰ We must accept that “good enough” is better than “one of these days.”

We must accept that selection is fundamental to who we are and why we are here. Archivists must, finally, realize, that by doing appraisal badly we do ourselves a huge disservice; we eviscerate what should be one of our principal sources of power. The consequences of this action frustrate each of us almost every day but for this problem we have no one to blame but ourselves and can find no way to fix it but to change our values to better serve our mission.

Preservation. I am almost reluctant to make preservation a core value, because it has been misused so often as an obstacle to selection and even to use. As a profession it has long been a truism that we “balance” use and preservation, but I believe that gives too much weight to our custodial instincts. Use should almost always trump preservation, particularly now when we have so many options for providing use with minimal preservation risks. In a major study of access in the 1990s, *one-fifth* of researchers reported being barred from using collections because of poor physical condition.²¹ What is the point of “preserving” collections that we will not let researchers use because we are preserving them? And it is not sufficient to insist that “someday” resources will become available to conserve the collections. Given the more recent report on our profession’s preservation abilities—which found that “Only 20% of institutions have paid staff—whether full-time or part-time—dedicated to conservation or preservation responsibilities”—such claims are mere bravado.²²

We should instead consider giving heed to one of Maynard Brichford’s seven sinful thoughts, in which he provocatively but seriously argued that archivists should accept that not all accessioned materials are worth extraordinary conservation measures. Instead, he said, we should “‘Let them rot.’”²³ What that would mean in practice is that we would allow them to be used up, if necessary, in the belief that some use is better than no use.

We must more clearly define the place of preservation in our constellation of archival values. While in some respects fundamental to all we do, it is a means rather than an end. We preserve in order to use. And we preserve only that which we consciously and methodically select. We are not preservationists, we are archivists. And again this is part of our power. We know that our institutions and society cannot and should not support with resources the simple instinct to preserve. We provide a professional assessment of what should be preserved, and why.

²⁰ F. Gerald Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (SAA, 1993), p. 72.

²¹ Ann D. Gordon, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage: The Report of the Historical Documents Study* (Washington, DC: 1992), p. 46.

²² Heritage Preservation, *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* (December 2005),

²³ Maynard Brichford’s “Seven Sinful Thoughts,” *The American Archivist* (Winter 1980), p. 14.

Otherwise, we wind up arguing that we need more space, and more staff, to store more and more stuff that nobody actually uses. This is not a new formulation, by any means. “Society,” Gerry Ham wrote in the 1980s, “must regard such broadness of spirit as profligacy, if not outright idiocy.”²⁴ Our hardheaded assessment of preservation as a means to a utilitarian end must be part of our image as sensible and practical administrators, providing the best cultural or accountability bang for the buck.

Democracy. While our librarian and records manager colleagues define their democratic value as supporting a generally informed citizenry and the right to free expression,²⁵ archivists are more concerned with governmental accountability in a republic. The transparency and accountability of the government to the people is a hallmark of our democracy. In a letter to W.T. Barry in 1822, James Madison wrote that “a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.” As SAA stated in a letter to Congressional leader requesting they overturn the Executive Order that undermined the Presidential Records Act: “As do all citizens, we believe, archivists have a vested interest in protecting the fundamental tenet of democracy that holds leaders accountable not solely to history in the long term but to the electorate in the short term as well. Access to the records of office—to the people’s office—is an essential part of that accountability.”

SAA has carried this principle further, protesting the alienation of mayors’ and governors’ records from municipal and state archives respectively, expressing outrage over the failure of the Executive Office of the President to properly protect official emails, and in a previous administration objecting when proposed appointee to Archivist of the United States seemed to politicize that institution and undermine its ability to act as nonpartisan arbiter of selection and access to public records. Serving as a public watchdog in support of access is another fine example of how doing our job is interrelated to power. A watchdog, or if need be a whistle blower, clearly is a valued asset. In this case power comes from both being able to utter the needed warning and the public’s expectation that we will play such a role.

Service. There has been controversy over whether we do or should serve society or our institution first. I posit that our first service obligation is to our institutions and their clients, that indeed we do not have a social service role so much as we have a value as a social good. To put it another way, as individual archivists our allegiance is to our institutions; as a profession we have committed to certain social responsibilities. All archives and archivists must be committed to institutional service, whether that service includes the public or not. We are charged with

²⁴ F. Gerald Ham, “Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance,” *American Archivist* 47:1 (Winter 1984), 12. G. Philip Bauer presented a similar formulation, arguing that society should not be expected to allocate unlimited resources to preserve government records, in *The Appraisal of Current and Recent Records*, Staff Information Paper 13 (National Archives and Records Service, 1946).

²⁵ Librarians state “A democracy presupposes an informed citizenry. The First Amendment mandates the right of all persons to free expression, and the corollary right to receive the constitutionally protected expression of others. The publicly supported library provides free and equal access to information for all people of the community the library serves.” www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/corevaluesstatement/corevalues.htm Records managers “Support the free flow of publicly available information as a necessary condition for an informed and educated society.” <http://www.arma.org/about/overview/ethics.cfm>

providing an effective and efficient connection to our holdings, so that our users, whoever they are, can benefit from them to the fullest extent. Service is the lynchpin between access and use, and as such of fundamental importance to our profession. Whether processing, appraising, or directly providing reference all that we do must be seen in terms of service to our users. Ultimately, archives and archivists are foremost about people and not things—we serve our users first, not our collections.

An article on marketing repositories observed that “Archives presented as a [sic] cultural and social institutions can be marketed...and understood by the target market community.”²⁶ I find the use of “target market community” interesting, because it suggests to me that we are not best off addressing or serving “society” as a whole, but our institutions’ targeted audience. It is difficult to see success in marketing the abstract notion of archives to the even more abstract notion of society—instead we must market to our constituents, internal or external, narrow or broad, private or public. Rather than arguing about whether archives have a universal “social” mission, we should instead be focusing on fully internalizing the very commitment to a clearly defined mission on the one hand, and to marketing on the other—neither have we done well in the past. Targeting also speaks to one of the key elements of power—developing a constituency. Service results in more than good will; it results in good allies who can assist the archives.

Diversity. ALA has adopted as one of its core values that “We value our nation’s diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve”²⁷—archivists must maintain this value just as strongly. We must renew and maintain our commitment to ensuring that our holdings adequately reflect the variety of ethnicities, religions, cultures, etc. that comprise our documentary universes. And cojoined with this we must strive to break down barriers between mainstream institutions and “underserved” communities, to help ensure that our user population is as diverse as our holdings. On the one hand we should take some heart in knowing that our profession’s current racial diversity equals that of the library profession (which has been focusing on recruitment for many years longer); on the other hand neither profession’s ranks come close to mirroring US society as a whole.

While SAA has a role to play in recruitment and in helping to break down barriers between those holding primary sources and those who might use them, most of this work must be done by individual repositories. How does one institution change the ethnic balance of the profession? Our College and University Archives Section recently proposed several ways, in response to Elizabeth Adkins’ call last year to consider diversity. We can help expose new audiences to archives by helping to introduce minority populations to the profession—by attending local career fairs and community events, by offering tours and presentations to K-12 and undergraduate groups, by acquiring and publicizing multicultural collections. The first step in increasing the roles of minority archival grad students is in making their communities aware of archives as a career and as a contribution to those very communities’ identity and heritage.²⁸

²⁶ W. Bernard Lukenbill, “Social Marketing for Archives: The Austin History Center Experience,” *Strategic Marketing in Library and Information Science*, Irene Owens ed (Haworth, 2002), 169

²⁷ ALA, “Libraries: An American Value,”
<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/americanvalue/librariesamerican.cfm>

²⁸ In response to a call originally issued by SAA President Elizabeth Adkins in her presidential address, the College and University Archives section proposes exactly this type of individual action as important in achieving the profession’s diversity goals. Email from Betsy Pittman to Mark Greene, 25 April 2008.

SAA's new minority graduate scholarship, and other scholarships offered by regional associations, can help this process along, and SAA will be exploring other profession-wide initiatives; but fundamentally diversity must be a value and a goal for every professional.

Use and Access. "Use is the end of all archival effort," Theodore Schellenberg declared, and we must give it a priority value. "It is the duty of an archivist to open up the research treasures that are entrusted to his care.... He should not only accumulate and preserve documentary material; he should also make it accessible to others."²⁹ We should do everything we legally, ethically, and practically can to promote, ease, and sustain use by whomever our user group(s) happens to be. Dennis Meissner and I have argued long and hard to reform processing practices to speed and promote use. I believe we can and should alter other practices—appraisal, preservation, digitization, and electronic records administration—to the same end.

If, for example, we really value use, then we may want to shift our digitization approaches from item-level, metadata intensive to lower resolution and metadata at the file and series level. This may serve more users better at the same or less cost than our traditional approaches. Of course, to determine the validity of such assumptions we will need to directly engage our users, and be willing to change our practices in response to their needs.³⁰ Electronic records have to first be accepted as essential part of our documentation universe, second to be wrestled with with an understanding that we can do something to make them useable without having the perfect answers to long-term preservation, third to be described and presented in the same aggregate units—series, files, etc—as traditional records. Here, too, our fear of making the "wrong" decisions has kept us from dealing with these records at all, at a cost to our users and our institutions.

We value access because we hold use as our highest value. However, our access values are broader and deeper than this. For example, archivists should declare as librarians have that "we respect intellectual property rights and advocate balance between the interests of information users and rights holders."³¹ Intellectual access to our collections is being diminished continually, however, by the expansion of rights holder interests in law, so that at present our need is to support information users to the furthest extent possible. Access is perhaps most crucial when it applies to public records, and is a core component of our value of democracy. The people have a right to access the papers of their elected and appointed leaders, except in narrow instances relating to legitimate national security concerns and clearly delineated privacy rights. Even then, archivists should, whenever the value of access bumps up against the need for privacy, err on the side of access. We must also, I believe, support access by not falling into the trap of believing that we should or must protect "private" and "sensitive" information outside of a few clear

²⁹ Theodore R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York, 1965), p. 108.

³⁰ For our MPLP article we surveyed over 100 manuscript repositories, and asked them "If you knew for a fact that your researchers would be willing to trade processing thoroughness for gaining access to more collections, would that change the way your institution processed collections?" Astonishingly, 66% said no, meaning they do not really care what their users think or want.

³¹ ALA Code of Ethics, <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/statementspols/codeofethics/codeethics.cfm> On the other hand, records managers focus entirely on the interests of rights holders in their code of professional responsibility: "Recognize the need for careful action to assure appropriate access to information without violation of the intellectual property rights of the owners of that information." <http://www.arma.org/about/overview/ethics.cfm>

categories of materials defined by law, and even then we should understand the law and not exceed its demands. Too many archivists believe it is their ethical duty to protect the sensibilities of donors or third parties, when instead this amounts to censorship and diminishment of access.³²

One further note. Not all use is direct. On the one hand there is as we all know the sort of indirect use that occurs when an author or documentary maker transmits his/her work to thousands of readers or viewers. But less obvious is what might be called symbolic use. Some people “use” some material simply by being proud or happy or secure that it exists. I believe that this is part of what Joel Wurl was pointing to when he wrote about community stakeholders and the provenance of ethnicity.³³ It is also part of what Jim O’Toole identified when discussing the “symbolic” importance of archives.³⁴ It matters to some people that archival material exists even if they never “use” it in any conventional sense. This too is a source of our power, even if it comes from people who have never entered an archive.

History. If one of our enduring values is accountability for democracy, surely another is our core relationship to history and culture (history in its broadest meaning, transcending the specific discipline and encompassing understanding the past of any discipline). During the 1990s our profession witnessed an assault on the cultural purpose of archives and their material, in favor of an argument that our most important purpose was maintaining evidence of transactions for institutions. It seemed to me then, and still today, that this was a legalistic vision of archives that excluded the very value that our institutions and society most often identified and cherished about our profession. Of course accountability matters, but not to the exclusion of history any more than history can simply exclude accountability. However, for most people, the archival value they most appreciate and rely on is that of preserving history and culture. We see this in the studies that have been conducted of public perceptions of archives.³⁵ We see it in the

³² Mark A. Greene, “Moderation in Everything, Access in Nothing?: Opinions About Access Restrictions on Private Papers,” *Archival Issues* 18:1 (1993), 31-41. See also the ALA code of ethics: “We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.” Part of this argument is practical, that in large modern collections archivists cannot hope to identify all materials that any third party might consider private and that because the concept of privacy rests on social norms and personal sensibilities that differ from place to place and change over time that there is no reasonable way for archivists to know with any reasonable certainty what material is private. Part of this argument is legal, in that, as Behrnd-Klodt has suggested, the more archivists claim the responsibility for protecting third party privacy the more likely they are to be held legally accountable for doing so. Menzi L. Behrnd-Klodt, “The Tort Right of Privacy: What it Means for Archivists...and for Third Parties,” Menzi L. Behrnd-Klodt and Peter J. Wosh, eds, *Privacy and Confidentiality Perspectives: Archivists and Archivist Records* (SAA, 2005), 53-60 (particularly 58-60). This is in contrast to ARMA’s Code of Professional Responsibility, which includes “Affirm that the collection, maintenance, distribution, and use of information about individuals is a privilege in trust: the right to privacy of all individuals must be both promoted and upheld.” <http://www.arma.org/about/overview/ethics.cfm> There are good reasons for this difference, but there is not space to examine them here.

³³ Joel Wurl, “Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience,” *Archival Issues*, 29:1 (2005), pp. 65-76.

³⁴ James M. O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 234-255.

³⁵ “As well as the physical definitions of archives, authors include descriptions of what archives represent. Archives, whether records collections or the repository, are history.” Arlene B. Schmuland, “The Image of Archives and Archivists Fictional Perspectives.” MA Thesis, Western Washington University (August 1997), p. 5. Also see her related article, “The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography,” *American Archivist*

institutions that have received infusions of resources over the past two decades. We see it in the vast majority of uses to which our holdings are put, whether we are institutional archives or collecting repositories, and whether we serve internal clients or external ones.

We make accessible for use the primary sources of history. I think there is resonance in the word “primary” that we have yet to mine. Our collections are first, most important, chief, key, principal, major, crucial—all the synonyms for primary. They are also, though we might think it too trite to say, alive with possibilities—open to multiple interpretations and multiple uses. The same document can be used to support differing sides of an argument; the same item can be used one day to prove citizenship, another day to complete a genealogy, a third day to buttress a History Day paper, and a fourth day to illustrate a PBS special. Primary sources also provide *historical* accountability for government and other entities and individuals. So in a very real sense, archives are synonymous with history.

The historical-cultural, as distinct from the accountability, purpose of archives and their primary sources is less concrete and measurable. Such a purpose is much more ethereal, supporting the mystic chords of memory which form a basis for all individuals, institutions, and societies. Through our active selection, our conscious choices in writing descriptions, and our role as mediators in reference, we help translate primary sources into sources of meaning for users. I have in the past referred, in fact, to the “power of meaning” as a source of archival strength and identity.³⁶ It is indeed a critical source of our power.

Conclusion

What I believe is most important is not necessarily the endorsement of the values presented today but rather that we collectively consider our values, debate them seriously, and consider adopting a formal set as our library colleagues have done. Indeed, during its Monday meeting I asked Council to create a Task Force to consider the utility and practicality of defining a set of values for the profession. Council agreed, and the TF will recommend to the next Council if such a task should go forward and, if so, how and by whom. I’m glad I was able to launch such a discussion, even though I don’t expect to be guiding it.

I know that some members of our profession believe that an attempt to define ourselves is inherently exclusionary, and will drive individuals out of the field or out of SAA. In the broadest sense definitions *are* exclusionary. Moreover, professions by definition are exclusionary; it is one of the key definitions of a profession. And it is true that I am suggesting these values define us as professionals. This certainly will exclude some non-professionals. Not on the basis of

62:1 (Spring 1999), 24-73. Additional evidence is provided by a study of newspaper articles about archives and archivists, which noted that “the single most common reason archives were newsworthy was because they played a role in creating cultural products currently being offered for public consumption. Such products included books, music, films, plays, exhibitions, festivals, and museums....” Sally J. Jacobs, “How and When We Make the News: Local Newspaper Coverage of Archives in Two Wisconsin Cities,” *Archival Issues* 22:1 (1997), 50.

³⁶ Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Meaning: The Mission of Archives in the Postmodern World,” *American Archivist* 65:1 (2002), 42-55. **Republished** as “La fuerza del significado: la misión de los archivos en la era posmoderna,” in Luis Hernandez Olivera and Terry Cook, eds., *Tabula: Estudios Archivísticos de Castilla y León*, 10 (2007), 195-212. The article is currently being translated into Portuguese for publication in Brazil. None of my other articles have received the international interest this one has, and I think for good reason—the power of historical meaning resonates broadly as an archival value.

what types of records they work with, what degree they hold, the repository they work in, not on the basis of private or public open or closed, regional or national affiliation, function performed. These values I put forward are meant to define us as a profession, yes, but as a broad profession, of curators and archivists, of those who work with government records and business records, of those with MLS's and without....

We must accept definition if we wish to be accorded the status of professionals, there is no escape. I am convinced that if we are to be confident in answering such questions as Who Am I and Why Am I Here, we need to wrestle with a set of values. In addition, as I indicated in my inaugural address, I believe we need to reshape our attitudes as well. We need to be consistently proud, creative, aggressive, and optimistic. We have to see ourselves and have others see us as the antithesis of the dusty, lonely, downtrodden, and optional bureaucrats we have seemed to resource allocators in the past. If one were to encapsulate this into an "elevator speech," something I could have used in 1985 to explain my profession to my relatives, it might go something like this: "Archivists are professionals who shoulder the power of defining and providing access to the primary sources of history, primary sources that protect rights, educate students, inform the public, and support a primal human desire to understand our past."

Defining and committing to values and changing attitudes will increase and broaden our power as a profession and as professionals. We can do so without becoming too narrow or too obsessed with credentials, institutions, formats, and functions. We can become stronger, more powerful, more respected, and more visible. We can become more valuable; but only if we know our own values.