

Beating the French*

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This paper addresses the questions 'An Inclusive or Exclusive Profession? Have collecting archivists and their concerns been marginalised by the mainstream profession? If so, why, do we deserve it, who or what suffers or benefits as a result, should we do anything about it and, if so, what?' The author calls for a return by collecting archivists to the fundamental archival mission of keeping records ('beating the French'). He concludes by proposing a parallel Pittsburgh Project to identify and articulate the functional requirements for socio-historical evidence.

MY FIRST PROBLEM when preparing this presentation was with pronouns. Should I talk about 'you' and 'us' or 'we' and 'them'? Should I try to use neutral language? Assuming I was called here to defend (or account for) your marginalisation by people like me, I decided to speak of you and us—but I should point out that this is one of the two Special Interests Groups I belong to.

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In 1991, at the Sydney ASA Conference, I participated in a session on what archivists had to do to survive the millennium. I recall saying that we needed to be much clearer about what we were doing and why, to have goals and strategies for achieving them, and to develop alliances with those who could help us. I did not foresee that this would be a comfortable or 'inclusive' process. I described it as a debate we had to have.

When I was invited to participate in this session some people suggested that, on the basis of what I said then, I had already ruled the collecting archivists out of the equation—because their activity did not fit the organisational management and accountability model I said I preferred. This was somewhat disconcerting to me since I had not yet decided what it was I thought I should say on the topic set for this morning. Worried, I rang Paul Brunton and asked him if he could recall my saying anything which suggested that collecting archivists had no role to play in the debate. He reassured me that I had not. If I had said anything that silly, he would have remembered—and held it against me.

It is now four years later and we still have not had that debate. In one sense, therefore, it is still too early for anyone to be feeling marginalised. Until we have the debate, until we are more focused professionally, archivists will continue to dither. And even if collecting archivists were being marginalised, there is not much to be concerned about. A disparate and confused profession is unlikely to achieve anything you would want to be part of anyway. On the main question, certainly, my views are settled—of course we must be exclusive and focused. Otherwise we are doomed—it may already be too late.

But that is not really the question. The real question is—who to exclude and who to include? And, necessarily, why? In fact, if we know why—we will be able to say who quite easily. The outlines of the debate are beginning to be drawn. This is not the time or place to attempt a form guide. Someone should do that but not me—at any rate, not here.

Broadly, the choices for archivists are recordkeeping (the capture, maintenance, and use of records as evidence), collection management (regardless of whether the 'collection' is gathered or distributed), and information management (with its focus on all information resources and on retrieval). Ray Edmondson seems to have added a fourth possibility in the latest issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*—which I shall call, probably unfairly, 'stuff for stuff's sake'.¹

It would be a mistake to conclude—as today’s topic implies—that the debate is over and an outcome settled. It might seem that way because so many of our best and brightest (and most articulate) are committed recordkeepers and their voice is a powerful one in our literature.

It does not seem that way to me. Confusion is still around and no one is marginalised yet by any means. So what the collecting archivists make of it all, assuming we ever have our debate, is not irrelevant to the final outcome. You can make a difference.

It might seem the alignment of the collecting archivists is obvious: that they are necessarily amongst the collection managers—the service providers. But I am not so sure. I do not start from the position that ‘collecting archives’ is the answer—now, ‘what was the question?’ The best thing which might be done with the kinds of material that collecting archivists deal with is not to collect them.

A story is told of the Duke of Wellington before the battle of Waterloo. He was approached by his second-in-command (Lord Uxbridge) who asked what were His Grace’s intentions so that if he (Wellington) were killed Uxbridge could carry them out. There are several versions of what happened next. The one I like best is the least likely but in all of them Uxbridge learns very little to his advantage. In my preferred version the Duke says, ‘Why, to beat the French to be sure.’ In the course of the day which followed, Wellington’s troops had to adopt many different tactics. Now they would defend a fortified position, now they would launch a cavalry charge. Sometimes they just had to hold the line and at other times artillery was called for. Then the army had to fall back and form squares. Finally it was all forward line ahead. None of these manoeuvres was right or wrong in and of itself. Each was justified only so far as it contributed to the achievement of the primary purpose—to beat the French.

That is what we have to learn—to separate ‘why’ from ‘how’. To know and form ranks around one unifying purposeful idea—that our job is to beat the French. The archival equivalent of beating the French is keeping records. Everything we do is justified to the extent that it contributes to that end. Anything we do which does not contribute to that end or, what is worse, gets in the way of it must be thrown out.

Collecting records is a means to an end—not an end in itself. It is a method devised, relatively recently, to better maintain and use records. If collecting records is the best way of keeping them collections must be cherished. If

collections get in the way of keeping records they must be jettisoned without a qualm. Beating the French is all that matters. To the extent that collecting archivists understand the prime directive, I see no reason why they should be marginalised. And I see no reason why collecting archivists should be less devoted to the prime directive than the rest of us.

There is a parallel here between theory and practice. Archivists are practical people and they sometimes make the mistake of dismissing theory. They forget that the opposite of 'practical' is not 'theoretical'—the opposite of 'practical' is 'impractical'. And it is often impractical not to be theoretical. You can get away with being just 'practical' for much of the time while each new expedient builds on another. Eventually, and this point is reached much sooner and more often in times like ours—of rapidly changing environments, you must return to your theoretical foundation to check your bearings and verify the direction of your practical steps. This really is what the so-called 'new' recordkeeping theory is all about—a rediscovery of very old principles as the basis for practical solutions to new problems.

Recordkeepers will not (or, at any rate, should not) despise collecting archivists for their methods. They are, after all, still common in the everyday work of most of us—even as we think through the implications of post-custodial recordkeeping. Curatorial techniques are neither good nor bad in themselves—they are means to an end. You cannot be marginalised if you continue to be devoted to good recordkeeping—using whatever techniques achieve that end.

Of course, I can see why this question has been raised. Clearly, the current debate about reinventing archives and the focus on electronic records and recordkeeping strategies poses special problems for the view that collecting archivists can be included.

As we move to 'reconnect archiving and recordkeeping' the traditional separation of collecting archivists from the process of records capture—which might be seen as definitive—seems to pose an insuperable obstacle. The theory of corporate recordkeeping is concerned with the capture, maintenance and use of records within an environment which is compliant with the functional requirements for evidencing business transactions.

The theory assumes that the archival mission can be fulfilled utilising a variety of tactics which do not necessarily (and perhaps seldom) involve getting one's hands on the stuff. Nevertheless, it is far from clear that a majority,

even amongst those who have proclaimed a non-custodial or distributed model, have in other respects forsworn collection management techniques.

Corporate archivists are still coming to terms with the implications of this and trying to find methods compatible with implementation of this theoretical position. It seems to me that the task of the collecting archivists is to review their methods to see what the implications are for the kinds of material they handle. I do not assume that the methods appropriate for reconnecting archiving and recordkeeping in the corporate environment can be applied without modification in the collecting environment. The task of finding out (or rediscovering) how to be a recordkeeper in your world can only be undertaken by you. Your 'how' will probably be different to mine, but we can share the same 'why'. To beat the French.

It seems to me that we are much closer when it comes to archival methods for maintaining and using records and that even in respect of capture—from which collecting archivists are traditionally perceived to be remote—there are techniques which could be adopted. Why, for example, are collecting archivists not exploring how the functional requirements for recordkeeping could be satisfied in software solutions designed specifically for personal use or for use by clubs, associations, and small business?

Another difficulty lies in the relatively narrow use of the word 'evidence' in the debate so far. It has been used chiefly in connection with legal and accountability issues. The corporate need for evidence of past action as the basis for continuity and as a guide for future decisions clearly has some personal equivalent but much less (if anything) has been written about it.

There is another sense in which evidence can be used. We can think of records as evidence for social/historical purposes. David Bearman calls this evidence of 'identity'. There is room for a lot more thinking about how records should be maintained and used to satisfy this other evidentiary need. In other words, there is a whole other process of re-invention to be undertaken—a parallel Pittsburgh Project if you like—to identify and articulate the functional requirements for socio-historical evidence. If you get around to discussing 'should we do anything about it and, if so, what?' there is a suggestion in there which could keep this Special Interest Group going for quite a few years.

I need hardly point out that this issue is critical for everyone—not just manuscript librarians and collecting archivists. Until the functional requirements for socio-historical evidence are articulated, the only need for corporate archives is as 'legal' evidence. By its very nature, such evidence is

needed for a relatively short time. The 'stuff' we have kept in the past sooner or later ceases to have any value except as socio-historical evidence.

Until those values are articulated we, none of us, not just collecting archivists, have any basis on which to operate once the purposes for which records are captured have been satisfied. And here I have some comforting words from David Bearman with whom I raised this issue earlier this year which I hope he will not mind my sharing with a wider audience. He thinks that while the functional requirements for preserving evidence of identity may not be the same, there is no reason to conclude that the technical requirements should be different.

There are a lot of unresolved questions here. If records are maintained to satisfy a need for evidence of identity, do we still need to maintain their qualities as records. Evidence of identity will be found in sources other than records; so does a distinction between records and other materials serving as socio-historical evidence need to be retained? To answer 'yes' we must be convinced that retained records, with their qualities of recordness kept intact serve as evidence of identity in ways which other sources of socio-historical evidence do not.

And is not this what we always believed? Is not it what Jenkinson called the secondary value of records. A value unrelated to the creation (the capture) of records but relevant to their maintenance and use. It is not such a radical position after all.

Collecting archivists are in an ideal position to confirm, by polling their users, that secondary users of archives are not just (as is so often alleged) seekers of information only. They could help us establish the recordkeeping, in preference to the information management, model. If, as I believe, secondary users do understand the difference (though they may indeed want access and retrieval systems which search across those boundaries) then collecting archivists are better placed than many to verify it.

None of this helps you in your particular struggle to find out how to do all this in a satisfactory way. I do not pretend to have an answer to that. What I am saying is meant to re-affirm what I have always believed—that the materials collecting archivists deal with are records and should be managed as such. In view of that, I think there is no reason for you to be marginalised if you do not want to be and there is every reason to suppose that as you take your place in a proper debate on the future of the profession your experience has something to offer which is of value to everyone.

I cannot provide an answer on whether collecting archivists have been or should be marginalised. I have tried to suggest ways in which you can be part of the process of reinvention. If you make that choice, I cannot promise you that it will be any easier for you than it is proving to be for the rest of us.

Endnote

1. R. Edmondson, 'Sacrilige or Synthesis? An exploration of the philosophy of audiovisual archiving', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 23, no. 1, May 1995, pp. 18–29.