

- 1) the Archivist of the United States possess demonstrated ability both as an archivist and as an administrator;
- 2) the Archivist of the United States, as an impartial servant of the public interest, be permitted to exercise judgment based on sound and accepted principles of the archival profession;
- 3) the integrity of our national documentary heritage be preserved through consistent application of the principles of the archives profession.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:30 A.M.

ANN MORGAN CAMPBELL, *Executive Director*

## A National Information System for Archives and Manuscript Collections

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This paper draws on a 1978 report of the Society of American Archivists Task Force on National Information Systems for Archives and Manuscript Collections. The author, the Archivist of the Smithsonian Institution, is chairman of that task force.

IN RECENT YEARS, ARCHIVISTS HAVE DEVOTED considerable attention to the design of repository information retrieval systems. Although some of this attention has been of high quality, principles for planning systems at the repository level have not gained general acceptance. Moreover, only a very few archivists have devoted systematic thought to planning information systems above the repository level. Even fewer archivists have grappled with issues relating to a national information system for archives and manuscript collections.

The problem has its hopeful aspects. In comparison with libraries, archives and manuscript collections have less investment in formal national systems, including presently NUCMC, the NHPRC data base, and a small segment of the OCLC data base. There exists the possibility, therefore, of creating a system with few constraints from present systems. The less encouraging prospect for archival national systems, compared with libraries, is that there is much less incentive for standardization and networking: the lure of the book—cataloged once for everyone—does not exist.

In 1980 we stand at a critical point for the development of a national information system for archives and manuscript collections. Several candidates for a comprehensive national system are gaining strength. The result may be that one will “win,” or, more likely, that several competing systems will continue to expand and compete. If the *archival profession* desires formative influence over a national information system for archives and manuscripts—if the profession wants more than a choice between competing systems established by major institutions—there is precious little time to act.

What is a national information system for archives and manuscript collections? It should be a rational, coherent system; but beyond that it could take many forms. Computers can and should play an increasing role in systems for intellectual access to archives and manuscript collections, but the notion of a national system must not be interpreted to imply an uncritical goal of setting up the ultimate computerized information system. Planning should aim at producing the best national system within available resources; use of computers is one of the major factors to be considered, not a planning assumption.

Perhaps a few examples will emphasize the wide range of possibilities for the national information system we seek. One possibility is a system (comparable to Lockheed's) which provides online, interactive searching of a data base for all archives and manuscript collections in the U.S. Although perhaps visionary, this option may be possible at least for regions and at the collection or record group level. Another possibility is a nationwide system of guides in compatible machine-readable form; this is one objective of the NHPRC project using SPINDEX. Another possibility is a vastly expanded NUCMC, which could remain in manual form or could be automated; generally speaking, OCLC and Library of Congress Manuscript Division systems can be viewed as automated versions of NUCMC. Another, much more modest, idea is a bibliography of subject and repository guides and a microfiche edition of these guides. These illustrations only touch on the options available.

What are the major problems ahead for establishing the best possible national information system for archives and manuscripts? It is useful to review these problems under two headings: specific problems, and the planning process. The following discussion attempts to raise pertinent questions; it does not pretend to provide answers.

### **Specific Problems.**

Archivists often operate as though they could construct archival access systems without reference to users. Identifying the users and potential users of archives and manuscript collections, and how these users approach the collections, are the most important considerations in constructing a national information system. Archivists cannot avoid this fact by refusing to address the question. Either they will construct systems which respond to the best possible assessment of user needs, or they will construct systems based on unexamined assumptions about users and user needs.

In fact, one important assumption has been made from the outset of this paper: considering archives and manuscript collections together. NUCMC is based on a contrary assumption, that archives should be accessed by means different from those used with manuscript collections; and many archivists assume that organizational archives and most manuscript collections are somehow fundamentally different. A national information system must establish the boundaries of the materials in the system. Characteristics of the materials comprise one important factor; a common body of users is another.

Most archivists hold an important assumption in common: archives are not for beginners. Many archivists pride themselves on stories of how they send researchers "back to the secondary literature." Despite occasional anti-user bias, probably there is a very important truth here for planners of a national information system. Archives are not for everyone, and attempts to design an information retrieval system which caters to all imaginable users of archives will increase costs and may reduce service to those for whom archives are the most appropriate information source. Many library and information science planners run amok here because of their zeal to serve users. There are indeed assumptions built into the above remarks. But the national information system for archives and manuscript collections might well be affected drastically by considering whether many potential users would be better served by another information source altogether.

Archivists must agree on a set of descriptive elements, such as collection title, volume, etc., and a standard for recording these descriptive elements. Descriptive cataloging need not go as far as it has in the library profession; but a minimum standardized description, accepted by all archival repositories, is needed.

Standardization, usually considered "good" by standardizers and "bad" by those standardized, should be pursued beyond the minimum descriptive factors mentioned above. An example is personal name standardization; one can imagine great benefits to repositories and users arising from common utilization of name authority files.

Subject access is virtually uncharted terrain for most archivists and manuscript curators. The topic requires a book, rather than a paragraph. Suffice it to say that modern thesaurus techniques exist which can ensure (1) that subjects identified as important to a national

information system are in fact indexed at the repository level; and (2) that there is reasonable agreement between repositories on meanings of terms used in indexing. But these techniques do not solve the problem, because we do not know very much about who the users are and what they want, and therefore we do not know how to index. We do know that indexing huge volumes of records (i.e., getting at the subjects in the records) is prohibitively expensive. Subject access obviously is related to much of the foregoing discussion, especially identification of users and their needs. A great deal of research and careful planning must precede any attempt to provide subject access on the national level.

All of the aforementioned problems must be considered in a cost-benefit context. Financial resources of archives and manuscript collections are quite limited, and many archivists would question placing national information systems high on the hierarchy of needs to be funded with available dollars. Should we invest in information retrieval systems while archives are rotting in repositories and potential archives are lost before they are even acquired? It can be argued that users do, after all, find information in present holdings. Beyond the pat answer that it does no good to accession archives which are never used, one can observe that enhancement of access may well prompt greater use, which in turn may result in allocation of greater resources to archives and manuscript collections. But the extreme fiscal constraints of the present situation remain the starting point.

In concluding this impressionistic overview of specific problems involved in constructing a national information system for archives and manuscript collections, it may appear odd that no reference has been made to computer hardware or software. The omission is intentional; those factors are relatively minor, compared to the substantive professional issues mentioned above. We must decide what we wish to do before we evaluate computers and programs.

### **Problems in the Planning Process.**

Should the national information system be planned and implemented by a single institution—the Library of Congress, NHPRC, or NARS? Even if one of these institutions desired to establish a cost-effective system responsive to users and the entire archival profession, could they do it? Even more problematical, could the archival profession design such a system, or even have significant input into its design? Significant input must comprise more than an opportunity to comment on completed systems.

There are at least two good reasons why the profession should be involved in system design. First, the resulting design might be better. Second, the resulting system will have a much greater potential for acceptance.

The Society of American Archivists has established a National Information System (NIS) Task Force, which has made grant applications for its meetings and some special studies. If funded, the task force will work on problems of a national information system, involving the archival profession through the SAA professional affinity groups and presentations at annual conferences. First, the task force will study present descriptive practices, with the objective of establishing minimum standards for descriptive elements (and the form of those elements) for records and manuscript collections. Probably these standards will be limited to the collection or record group level. These descriptive standards will define a basic set of data about archives and manuscripts, data applicable to a wide range of institutions; it is to be hoped that the standards would bridge gaps between archival and library systems as represented by the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules.

Depending on further funding, the NIS Task Force will pursue the problem of establishing criteria for evaluating computerized information storage and retrieval systems for archives and manuscript collections. Standardization of descriptive elements is one facet of the problem; others include subject access, online access versus batch processing, minimum response time, and the like, all of which must be evaluated in the archival context.

The next step would be evaluation of major existing systems by these criteria, and development of criteria for the ideal, but realizable, national information system.

If the task force is funded, archivists will be hearing about its activities from time to time. We will find out whether a planning process can be devised which involves large numbers of archivists and yet produces results.

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On page 139 of the Winter issue, in the list of the Fellows of the Society of American Archivists, Paul Lewinson's name was misspelled. We sincerely regret our error. THE EDITORS

### Recent Deaths

ERNST POSNER, 1892–1980. On 19 April 1980 The American University class in the History and Current Administration of Archives spent several hours at the Maryland Hall of Records, thus continuing the annual tradition set by Ernst Posner some forty years ago. At lunch the class drank a toast to Ernst, who had died the day before.

How can any one person speak for all the archivists who have been formally and informally educated in *archivology* as well as those who know him only by his writings and his influence?<sup>1</sup> This student registered with apprehension in 1947 for Posner's two-semester course. I was merely a junior archivist in the National Archives, performing routine duties such as packing, shelving, listing and labeling records, and answering simple inquiries.

Ernst's introductory lecture, delivered with his residual German accent, covered the etymology of key words, like *archives*, *scrinium*, and *records*, and the importance of "the second oldest profession." His erudition, especially in the classical languages and humanities, became quite evident by the end of his following lecture on archives in the ancient world.

The class saw little trace of the ordeal Ernst experienced before coming to the United States. He talked rarely about it; thus more than a score of years passed before Ernst and his wife, Katherine, related many of the triumphs and tragedies between World War I and his emigration to the United States in 1939. While discussing Barbara Tuchman's *Guns of August* and Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*, Ernst told of witnessing the Battle of Tannenberg from a hilltop. That he was wounded and earned a medal for bravery did not seem to him to be worth mentioning. From the Eastern Front he moved to the Western until the Armistice.

After the war Ernst resumed his studies in philosophy, history, and languages to complete his doctorate, magna cum laude, at the University of Berlin. Some months later, in October 1920, he entered the Prussian State Archives as an intern. The following year he became a full professional.

Until the Nazi era Ernst rose steadily in the Prussian Archives and achieved substantial stature within the profession and among the researchers who used the archival resources. He became not only a leading specialist in eighteenth-century Prussia, with his publication of *Acta Borussica*, but also gained recognition for his understanding of the problems concerning the disposition of recent records. By the early 1930s Hausreferent Posner became an archival instructor in Berlin.

Despite his war service and his scholarly achievements, Ernst, with his Jewish lineage, was placed, under the terms of the Nuremberg Laws, in a minor staff position. Nonethe-