

# Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era

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T. R. SCHELLENBERG, IN HIS 1958 ADDRESS to the SAA annual meeting entitled "The Future of the Archival Profession," observed that the future work of the archivist would be determined by the materials he must deal with: their organic character, their diverse form and content, and, above all, their volume.<sup>1</sup> I subscribe also to the notion that our work, and indeed our behavior as archivists, is determined by the nature of the material we deal with: we are what we accession and process.

We are conditioned also by our environment. Today we can see more closely than could Schellenberg that our work is also determined by the way our society records, uses, stores, and disposes of information. We see that the current revolution in information processing is inexorably changing our world and our work, pushing us into a new period in archival history, a period I call the *post-custodial era*. Our effectiveness as archivists in this new era depends on our ability to alter our past behavior and to fashion strategies to cope with both the opportunities and the problems created by this revolution.

During the *custodial era*, the mass of records we contended with was relatively small; the technology of records creation, storage, and retrieval was fairly simple; and we assumed a passive role in shaping the docu-

mentary record. Concern with the uniqueness of the material in our care, and the normal expectations of our custodial role, tended to make us uncommonly introspective, preoccupied with our own gardens, and too little aware of the larger historical and social landscape that surrounded us. Our introspective proclivity has isolated us from one another and fragmented our work, obscuring the advantages of cooperation and shared ideas. Our custodial ethos also has made us excessively proprietary toward our holdings, and, though the technology for resource sharing has long been available, this attitude has hindered our enjoyment of its benefits.

Furthermore, the lack of a collecting framework, coupled with an exaggerated sense of the importance of many records, has led to wasteful competition. In addition, our habits and attitudes have resulted in a distorted national record and a haphazard allocation of the nation's archival resources. Although once valuable, our perception of ourselves as custodians has now become a deterrent to the effective management of the national record.

So much for the past. The information revolution is forcing us into a more active role, in which we must make crucial decisions—or decide by not deciding—about the future of the historical record.

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<sup>1</sup> T. R. Schellenberg, "The Future of the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* 22 (Jan. 1959): 53.

Briefly, let me examine some ways technological society is changing the archival landscape, creating unparalleled opportunities for enhancing the archival record and problems in acquiring and preserving that record.

Chemistry and electronics have forever altered the archivist's placid world, and made it possible to compile a record of incomparable variety and completeness. We can capture information about the visible and audible world with speed and fidelity heretofore impossible. Photographs, films, and video tapes have replaced drawings; and electronic recordings have amplified and partially replaced written minutes and transcripts. Computer processing of information has allowed us to collect, preserve, and manipulate vast quantities of social and economic data.

Technology has made possible also a quantum jump in the capacity to store information. The capabilities of micrographic systems for data compaction are familiar to archivists, but this compaction pales when compared to computer storage technology. Let me present a Wisconsin example. Each year the state collects 2,400,000 tax returns, which it puts into 1,800 record center cartons; it films the records, reducing the bulk to 25 cubic feet. Much of this information ends up on computer tapes comprising less than one cubic foot. And this is low storage density compared to the newest devices on the market or on the horizon, such as bubble memories and optical disc systems. Soon, an optical system which stores and retrieves information by laser may make it possible to store on a single disc the size of a phonograph record a library of 40,000 books—more than the holdings of many archives.<sup>2</sup>

Technology also makes possible easy and up-to-date bibliographic information about our holdings, and facilitates access. In my Wisconsin example, access to any part of the tax return file takes only seconds. Access to the most advanced memory is measured in millionths of a second. More significant for archivists is technology's ability

to make the record available to remote locations. By linking the computer to long-distance telephone to form an on-line, interactive telecommunications network, the archivist can deliver computerized records to any researcher with access to a terminal. When technology makes it economically feasible, archivists might use facsimile document transmission for traditional material such as letters, photographs, and maps.

Less exotic technology facilitates more traditional means of information distribution. It is easy to create multiple copies of sound recordings, numeric machine-readable data sets, photographic files, or motion picture films, and to make them available for loan or purchase. Even more prosaic are the millions of rolls of archival microfilm that can be copied and sent anywhere. In short, archivists can make a large portion of their holdings as available as printed books. All it takes is a change in some outmoded ideas about where and by whom resources are used.

However, the technology that created these opportunities has added to our problems. Most obvious is the familiar problem of bulk. Desk top micro-processors, office copiers, and inexpensive offset printing have made it possible to produce and disseminate information at a staggering rate. Couple this with the administrative and legal demands of an increasingly complex and regulated society, and the capacity of bureaucracies to meet these needs, and the result is literally mountains of records. Bulk will remain a problem, though the mountains of paper may be less of a problem as ever more accessions come to us on rolls of microfilm, sheets of microfiche, and reels of magnetic tape. But the mountains will still be with us, though they might look like mole hills; for the larger problem of the 1980s is not physical bulk but the mass of information. No matter how compacted, this mass presents problems of control and access. And even if we can compact and control, there remains a still larger intellectual issue. As Peter Drucker recently pointed out, "the critical problem

<sup>2</sup> James E. O'Neill, "Archives in the 'Eighties," unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 31 July 1980.

is not how to process or get information but to determine what information is."<sup>3</sup> The problem is information overload.

One of the paradoxes of this information revolution is that while it gives us abundant information it creates an environment hazardous to its preservation. Our society places a premium on immediacy, efficiency, and economy; not surprisingly, many media contain the seeds of their own destruction. Technology has created records that are fluid, amendable, and reusable. Updatable microfiche systems can replace or delete documents; the information in data base management systems is in constant flux and, like other media such as magnetic tapes and floppy discs, can be erased and rewritten. The economics of reuse adds to the difficulty in accessioning these records before the information disappears. Indeed, our society sees permanence as a vice. An article in the August 1980 *Scientific American* noted that one of the major drawbacks of the laser disc memory is that at present it cannot be erased and reused.<sup>4</sup>

Because record maintenance is expensive (and sometimes legally and politically hazardous), bureaucracies are responding with comprehensive records disposition programs; and thus preservation is no longer left to chance. These programs are beneficial, but the necessity of archival review is obvious. Less obvious, perhaps, are the results of the accelerated use of general schedules—disposal plans that cover all records of a certain class or jurisdiction. In many cases these schedules are a coarse seine that cannot separate the particular, the exceptional, or the idiosyncratic from the general and routine. And as we enter a decentralized computer environment of word processors and micro-computers, every individual, as James O'Neill points out, will become his own records manager; and scheduling, as we now know it, will be difficult if not impossible.<sup>5</sup>

Records that escape these hazards may be technologically obsolete. So rapid are

the changes in information processing that data bases of a few years ago may be difficult if not impossible to use either technically or economically. Many information systems must literally be appraised and accessioned as they are created, or not accessioned at all.

There is also a hazard in the social environment. In providing social services and regulating economic activity, governments have collected vast amounts of data. These data deal with the lives of ordinary people, and as such are a potential corrective to the structural biases in traditional archival holdings. To protect personal privacy, many state legislatures have recently passed laws mandating the destruction of significant parts of such potentially valuable archival records. Neither archives nor researchers have made any attempt to modify privacy legislation to prevent the loss of such information, even though there are statistical strategies for minimizing disclosure, technological methods for masking personal identities, and model laws (Georgia's is one) that would both protect privacy and provide for the preservation of the records.

Not only will technology and society push us into a more activist role in managing the archival record, but in other ways it will force us to reexamine many basic assumptions about archival theory and practice. For example, how does the traditional concept of provenance apply to a data base management system where information is stored without regard to administrative or functional context? Is not the notion of original order irrelevant to records stored in a random access file? Does not the archivist's emphasis on the uniqueness of his materials lose meaning when records can easily be duplicated, reformatted, and transmitted, and when the original record copy and reproductions are indistinguishable? How can the archivist be assured of the integrity of his records, given the ease with which they can be manipulated, amended, and altered? Further,

<sup>3</sup> Peter Drucker, "Managing the Information Explosion," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 April 1980.

<sup>4</sup> R. M. White, "Disc-Storage Technology," *Scientific American* 243 (Aug. 1980): 148.

<sup>5</sup> O'Neill, "Archives in the 'Eighties," pp. 11–12.

what does it mean to be a processing archivist in this new environment? Certainly the term as defined in the SAA *Glossary* is meaningless when applied to such information formats as microforms, audio and visual recordings, and machine-readable data.

From this brief overview it is obvious that technological society is an uncongenial environment for the custodial archivist.

The institutional response to this new world of information has been proliferation of archival programs and decentralization of holdings. This response has been unplanned and oblique; and it has been partly conditioned by our custodial past and primarily limited to the problem of mass: more archives in more places saving more records.

This process has been most pronounced in the last two decades; its dimensions are amply documented in NHPRC-sponsored guides, in SAA's institutional affiliation directories, in recent projects such as the survey of women's history sources, and in the membership data available from SAA and regional archival organizations. For example, 1,946 more repositories are listed in the 1979 *NHPRC Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories* than in the more selective 1961 *Hamer Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States*, an apparent growth of 149 percent in eighteen years. Proliferation has been especially evident (and more precisely identified) in college and university archives, where the number of programs has increased from 561 to 940 since 1966 and, according to a recent survey, 37 percent of SAA members are now employed in academic settings.<sup>6</sup> There is similar growth in the area of special subject archives, such as those dealing with ethnic groups and immigration, science and technology, theater, the arts, and the professions. Since 1961, twenty states have begun local public records programs; while, under the stimulus of federal funds, increas-

ing numbers of municipalities are setting up archives and records programs. More dispersed and less visible are the hundreds of local museums, public libraries, and historical societies that now nourish the historical roots of their communities.<sup>7</sup>

The development of the NARS regional archives centers and state archival networks is further evidence not only of program proliferation but also of the continuing decentralization of holdings. In five midwestern states local public records are now dispersed among forty-one regional depositories. Several organizations and corporations that formerly relied on publicly supported archival centers now maintain their own records; the American Federation of Labor and the International Harvester Corporation are two examples.

The search of an unsettled people for a sense of community, the requirements of a litigious society for seemingly eternal evidence, and the response of bureaucracy to the needs of technological society guarantee continuing proliferation and decentralization. The benefits are many. The process has spread the burdens, and somewhat lessened the risks, of compiling a national archival record; it has dramatically increased resources devoted to archival endeavors; and it has accelerated the growth and maturation of a profession. But this process does not solve many problems of the post-custodial era; in fact it exacerbates some and even creates new ones. Proliferation and decentralization reinforce the archivist's introspective, proprietary, and competitive propensities. Though it gives the illusion of providing more representative coverage, the process actually biases the record further, particularly in favor of politicians and academic institutions. A 1976 study for the Public Documents Commission, on accessioning the papers of public officials, found that while such collections comprised an average 5 percent of the holdings of the thirty-two institutions

<sup>6</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Directory of College & University Archives in the United States & Canada* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: SAA, 1966; and Chicago: SAA, 1980); SAA 1979 Salary Survey of the Archival Profession (computer printout provided by the SAA Executive Office).

<sup>7</sup> National Historical Publications and Records Commission, *NHPRC Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories* (Washington: NHPRC, 1979), passim.

surveyed, they occupied one-fourth of their shelf space. Only two institutions saw the solution to this exponential problem in more rigorous appraisal standards; the rest saw it in typically custodial terms of more space and staff.<sup>8</sup> In my state, academic institutions fare even better than politicians. Last year, 42 percent of all records approved for preservation by the Public Records Board were from the University of Wisconsin System; the remaining 56 percent documented the "other" three branches of government. Further, with the equivalent of fifteen full-time archivists working with the public records, the state allocated ten archivists to the university system. Some of this differential reflects the long-standing decentralization of educational systems, but it also underscores my point that unplanned expansion diffuses and distorts the nation's resources available for archival activity.

These two major developments, the impact of technology on the archival record and the proliferation of archival programs, will increasingly shape the archival world in the post-custodial era. To utilize the potential they offer, as well as to help solve the problems they have created, archivists and their institutions must address the following agenda:

1. We must develop coherent and comprehensive acquisition programs at all levels, national, regional, and local.
2. We must utilize the benefits of modern technology to provide easy and centralized access to increasingly complex and decentralized holdings.
3. We must deal with the impact of modern technology on the creation of information, and devise programs for its selective preservation and use.
4. We must participate in resolving the conflict between the freedom of information and the right to privacy as they affect the quality and content of the archival record, and access to that record.

5. We must make better use of the limited (and, I might add, diminishing) resources available for archival activity nationwide.

This agenda cannot be met solely by more and larger archival programs. But it can be achieved at the institutional and inter-institutional level by deploying strategies for cooperation, for outreach, for planning, and for research and development.

Inter-institutional cooperation is an essential feature of a complex and interdependent technological society. Our library allies know this, for they have long utilized cooperative approaches to common problems and have developed an array of structures to deal with these problems. But only now are archivists beginning to realize the value of cooperation as an archival strategy.<sup>9</sup> Recent examples in the areas of conservation, bibliographic access, acquisition programs, and networking suggest the benefits of this strategy.

Not surprisingly, most archival interest in inter-institutional cooperation has focused on documents conservation. For the archivist, such cooperation has many benefits and few risks. It provides expertise beyond the level available to most archival institutions, it best utilizes limited conservation resources, and it provides an easy partnership with librarians in an area of mutual interest. Thanks to the fine-arts conservators, we have models for such cooperation. And finally, such cooperation is most compatible with the custodial aspect of our work. The best known example of this kind of cooperation is the New England Documents Conservation Center that provides a variety of services, including paper restoration, microfilming, consulting, educational programs, and disaster assistance on a regional, shared basis. This program, like similar projects in Ohio and California, and the recently formed eighteen-state Western Conservation Congress,

<sup>8</sup> F. Gerald Ham, "Accessioning the Papers of Public Officials: An Examination of the Laws and Practices of the States" (report commissioned by the National Study Commission on the Records and Documents of Federal Officials, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> John A. Fleckner, "Cooperation as a Strategy for Archival Institutions," *American Archivist* 39 (Oct. 1976): 447-59.



a preservation advocacy group, focus heavily on the paper record. Much more urgent and still lacking are comprehensive regional models for the range of non-paper media, the products of chemistry and electronics I mentioned earlier.

Inter-institutional cooperation of another sort is essential to the creation of a national archival information system. NUCMC is an early but flawed example of such cooperation. A more recent and comprehensive program is the NHPRC's National Guide Project, now being tested regionally by the cooperative Midwest State Archives Guide Project and by projects in New York, Kentucky, and Washington State. Using a data-base management system that allows the information to be easily updated and expanded, the national project will make it possible to produce timely finding aids to records for various geographic areas or in various subject fields.

The NHPRC project is but one model; others include the library utilities OCLC and RLIN, both of which are developing formats for private records. The role of these emerging networks in a national online archival retrieval system is still unclear. But before we have any national information system, we must first develop descriptive and access standards. This can only be done cooperatively.

Ironically, where cooperation is most needed, it is least developed. Though there is increasing rhetoric about the necessity for coordinated acquisitions programs to eliminate wasteful competition and to document contemporary life and culture more comprehensively, little has been accomplished. In 1975, the Minnesota Association of Collecting Agencies was established to promote an integrated statewide collecting effort. The objective was laudable but the project was abortive, and for good reason. This is the most difficult area of inter-institutional collaboration. There are no models to guide us, no planning is underway, and, even more basic, most archival agencies lack well-defined written acquisition policy statements. Coordinated acquisition programs confront our tradition of territoriality; they involve a risk of conflict.

We are developing structures that help minimize this risk. In recent years archi-

vists have created regional networks coordinated by statewide archival agencies that encompass several forms of cooperation. These networks are designed to maximize the use of limited resources. They have proven effective for dealing with neglected and deteriorating local government records, a systematic approach to regional and community documentations, and a crucial first step in developing coherent acquisitions programs. In effect, networks create supra-institutional structures to resolve conflicts of institutional interests and to free us to pursue common goals.

Our second strategy, outreach, is based upon a dynamic new role for archival institutions at all levels. It calls for archival centers to act not only as custodians for records, but also to facilitate and coordinate inter-institutional activities and to provide services for less developed programs in their particular region or jurisdiction. Let me elaborate: many new programs mentioned earlier are little more than so-called historical collections suddenly elevated to the status of archival agencies, but with little of the planning, staff, and other requirements for such agencies. These new programs urgently need a wide range of archival extension services.

But outreach is also a strategy of enlightened self-interest. Many potential providers of archival services are themselves approaching the limits of archival growth as the primary records custodian for their jurisdiction. They now realize they must encourage and assist other institutions and organizations such as local historical societies, public libraries, municipalities, voluntary associations, businesses, and so forth, to share this responsibility. In effect, they must encourage planned proliferation and decentralization. Already a few statewide archival centers have begun to accept this role, limiting their accessions program and enlarging their program of extension services.

The dynamic new role has many facets. One is that of an archival service center providing traditional services in a new cooperative setting, services that smaller or less developed programs cannot efficiently provide. These services might include co-

operative purchasing of supplies, conservation and micrographics, records survey and appraisal, and records processing. Several institutions are already providing or experimenting with the delivery of some of these services.

But merely providing services is not enough. Proliferation has created a corps of untrained personnel who need short-term vocational assistance, and there are already numerous professional and institutional examples of such assistance; basic workshops sponsored by the Minnesota Historical Society and University of Minnesota, and by the Milwaukee area archivists are but two.

In addition to these traditional services, this new audience needs help in the more demanding work of planning and administration. They need a consultant service to deal with particular and immediate needs such as project planning and securing external funding as well as with long-range planning and program development. The California Historical Records Educational and Consultant Service is the prototype of such a program, though other models are emerging in some state networks.

Another facet of this dynamic new role is leadership in cooperation. The archival center is the logical organization to offer this leadership, for it has the staff and expertise; and this role should be part of its institutional mission. Of course, cooperation among institutions of unequal resources is difficult. Too often, one party becomes the cooperator and the other the coopted. Leadership in cooperation must be neither self-serving nor paternalistic.

The multi-faceted role for archival centers can be adopted by institutions as diverse as presidential libraries, state archives, and religious denominational archival centers. A few university archives have taken on such a role, but many more might deploy some of their resources through an outreach program to become

an archives serving the community as well as the campus.

With the linkages provided by our first two strategies, archivists can rationalize and coordinate the proliferation and decentralization of archival programs and holdings to develop more integrated archival systems.

But there are preconditions for cooperation, outreach, and integration. One is planning. It is essential to the process of identifying and analyzing records needs, delineating objectives, devising and testing strategic approaches, and evaluating achievement. Unfortunately, here again our custodial past handicaps us. To date, our plans have been rudimentary and we have been painfully slow in making them. A look at some of the archival planning underway, however, suggests that many of the components necessary to develop an integrated, multi-level program are already in place.

Repository level planning is one basic element. A recent impetus to planning at this level comes from the NEH self-study grants to twenty-two major historical agencies. Information about the process and products of this effort must be analyzed and shared. System-wide planning has many benefits for repositories that are part of a larger entity. The *Core Mission and Minimum Standards* statement prepared by the University of Wisconsin System Archives Council demonstrates how planning at this level can eliminate redundancy and produce greater leverage for participating units. The adoption of a revised version of this statement by the SAA has added to archival planning literature.<sup>10</sup>

Planning at the repository or system level is difficult; but, as Larry Hackman points out, it occurs in a context in which resources, responsibilities, and decision-making processes are relatively easy to identify.<sup>11</sup> But, even at the more difficult inter-institutional level we are developing struc-

<sup>10</sup> The statement was originally printed in 1977. It was reprinted in *The Midwestern Archivist* 3, no. 2 (1978): 39–58; and in *College and University Archives: Selected Readings* (Chicago: SAA, 1979), pp. 215–27. The statement was also the basis of the “Guidelines for College and University Archives,” adopted by the SAA and printed in *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980): 262–71.

<sup>11</sup> Larry J. Hackman to committee members, SAA Program Committee, 1982, 10 September 1980.

tures and approaches that will contribute to a national effort. For example, within the states, the historical records advisory boards are new and potent structures for planning, bringing together diverse, sometimes competing, interests in a setting that permits coordinated planning and action. But, thus far, most state plans are little more than archival laundry lists. If the recommendations of a recent conference of state records coordinators are adopted, more comprehensive statewide plans may soon be forthcoming.<sup>12</sup>

And we are beginning to act also at the national and multi-institutional level, even with the records of labor, an area long noted for its collecting wars. In November 1980, archivists, concerned scholars, and labor leaders met at the George Meany Center with the avowed purpose of planning a "rationalized cooperative program for the preservation and use of the historical record of American labor."<sup>13</sup>

The last component in our paradigm is planning for the profession as a whole. Here, planning structures must both transcend and intersect institutional and geographic boundaries. At this level the most visible work has been done by the SAA. The Committee of the 70s, and the 1977 Archival Priorities Conference were important steps, and we are taking others. The institutional evaluation program, for example, will allow repositories to assess and modify their activities in the light of the broader purposes and principles of the profession; educational planning is giving us standards for graduate archival training and the means to enforce them. Other planning efforts relate directly to the technology that surrounds us. The Task Force on Automated Records and Techniques has prepared a five-year plan to educate the profession in the preservation and use of machine-readable records. Even more ambitious is the objective of the National Information System Task Force to develop

common descriptive standards and criteria for evaluating computerized information and storage systems.

In some planning attempts we have been following paths laid down by other professions. Their success in these ventures, as well as the successes we have achieved in some of our efforts, underscore the need to develop greater planning competence and capacity. We must reject the notion that planning is a frill or an excuse for inaction. We must continue to look outside our own field to study planning models of others. We must share our experience and learn from our failures. Above all, we must allocate a much larger proportion of our resources, both time and money, to the planning process.

Planning tells us what to do. Research and development, our fourth strategy, gives us the tools to do it. Like planning, research and development is a neglected archival activity. Once benign, this neglect has become a serious impediment to our work. We need new tools, new methodologies and theories, if we are to make operational the programs on our agenda for the 1980s.

There are many obstacles to developing needed archival research and development. We have no infrastructure to support such programs, and most of our institutions lack the resources to sponsor research. Unlike academic disciplines, we have no corps of teacher-researchers encouraged to do such work and paid for it. The craft aspects of our work leave us preoccupied with daily practice, a preoccupation too often obscuring the need for new methods and techniques. Resource-poor ourselves, we overlook too often the efficiency and necessity of supporting research and development conducted by other professions, but critical to our work.

Despite the general neglect, we have carried out some important research, particularly into the preservation of the physical

<sup>12</sup> "Recommendations to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission from a National Conference of State Historical Records Coordinators. Conference conducted at Atlanta, Georgia, June 6-7, 1980," mimeograph. Major papers of the conference have been published in the Winter 1981 issue of *Georgia Archive*.

<sup>13</sup> "A Proposal for a Conference on the Records of American Labor. Presented by the George Meany Center for Labor Studies, Inc., May 15, 1980," p. 1. For the results, see "Report of the Conference on the Records of American Labor" (1981).



record. One example is the joint SAA-NARS project a decade ago on the permanence and durability of paper and related materials. More recently, funding has gone to research on the preservation of the visual record. We now have preservation standards for most traditional records.

However, we also desperately need research on the life span of the products of high technology. And we need to know how to convert information from less permanent into more permanent and accessible forms. Here the Public Archives of Canada is providing leadership, particularly in research into the archival implications of high density, random access storage for visual archives such as the video disc and its progeny.

Research and development is necessary in almost every area of our work. We should develop more useful finding aids. To do this we must first study the strategies our researchers use to get to the archives, and how they use its holdings. To cope with the mass and redundancy of the modern record, we need more appraisal and sampling models such as the one developed by Wayne State University for labor grievance files. We need empirical studies on the economics of records processing and preservation in general; we need model legislation to insure the preservation of and access to the public archives. We need—the list is endless.

But most of all we need an institute for archival research—an institute that would not only assist us in improving our practice, but also would enable us to conduct needed theoretical studies.

To implement these strategies and cope with our information-laden world, we must change our behavior and that of our institutions. But change is never easy. It requires psychological adjustment in individuals; it requires institutions to reorder their priorities, to alter what they do with their resources. Change requires risk, and risk-taking is best encouraged by the promise of rewards.

Archivists and their institutions respond to many kinds of rewards, but I want to examine only one: added resources. These

come to us from such sources as state and local governments, private foundations, and corporate benefactors. But these sources, responding to local needs and institutional imperatives, have given us, reasonably enough, more archives in more places. These resources cannot, therefore, bring about the kinds of changes I have been talking about. The profession needs funding sources that share our wider concern for the future of the historical record. The NHPRC Records Program and the NEH Research Resources Program are such sources. Together they have provided over \$4,000,000 annually for support of this record. So far, most of this funding has gone to support projects that make material available to researchers: records acquisition work, processing, and establishment of and assistance to archives. In a beneficial way, the commission and the endowment have supported proliferation and decentralization. But they can contribute more to solving our problems. They can help us alter the structure and behavior of our institutions. They can help us create an environment where fragmentation yields to coordination, isolation to integration, and competition to cooperation. They can, because they have great leverage. Their policy decisions can shift archival activity toward the strategies I have been discussing.

Recent funding decisions, especially on the NHPRC side, indicate that the commission and the endowment are doing just that. They will do more, if we will give them the proposals; if we, as a profession, will support initiatives in these directions. In no small way, their effectiveness in fostering change depends on us.

Our effectiveness depends upon the choices we make. In his recent essay, Peter Drucker discussed the relationship between information and critical choice. Information, he wrote, is the business executive's main tool—indeed his capital—and he, not "that mythical creature the information specialist," must decide what information he needs and how to use it.<sup>14</sup> In a parallel way, it is our capital. And if it is essential for the businessman to control

<sup>14</sup> Drucker, "Managing the Information Explosion."

decisions about information, then how much more important it is for the archivist, whose role is the selection and preservation of the archival record, to understand and participate in decisions affecting the record of the future.

Returning to an earlier refrain: we are what we accession and process—but much

more. In a profound way we are also a product of our decisions. Only archivists and their profession can determine whether the post-custodial era will be one of archival abdication or of planned response and integration.

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F. GERALD HAM is the archivist of the State of Wisconsin. His article is his address, slightly revised for publication, to the plenary session of the SAA annual meeting in Cincinnati, on 1 October 1980. He was President of SAA, 1973–74.