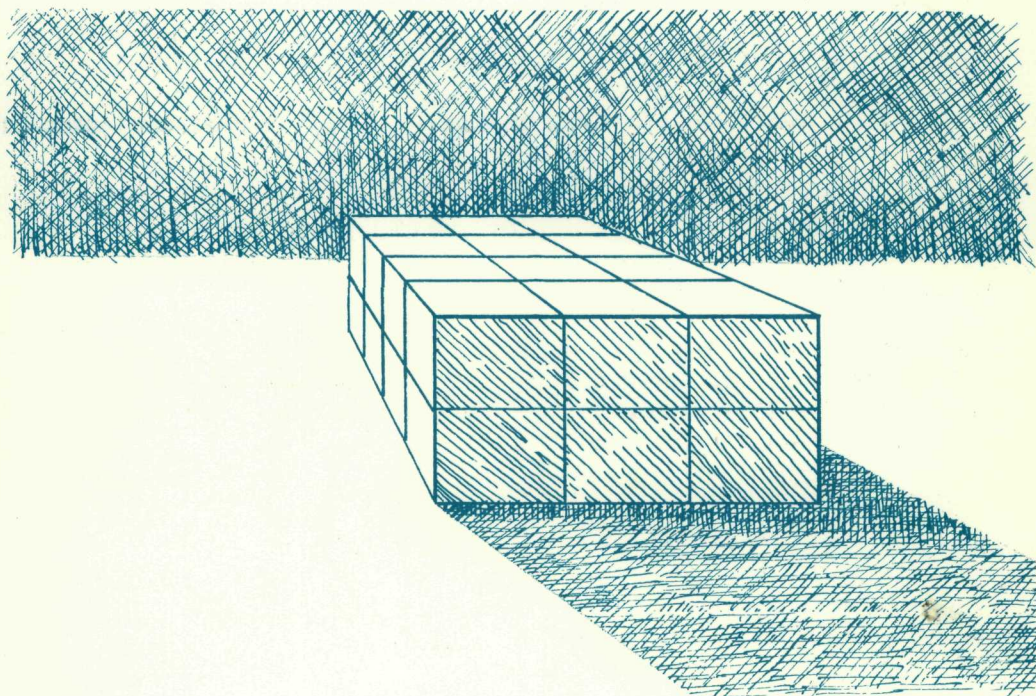


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The American Archivist

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Cover note: Do television executives justify their rerun seasons by citing the virtues of continuity? This issue contains another perspective on the theme of the Fall 1990 issue, in the form of the ten background papers that informed the report and recommendations of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description. The matrix continues to represent the sources, the strength, and the focus of the standards.

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Forum

Editor's Note:

The Forum is described in the editorial policy statement as containing letters to the editor commenting on recently published articles or other topics of interest to the profession. Its purpose is to provide the equivalent of comments and rejoinders from the audience in a conference session, permitting interchange and discussion over issues that have been raised, in the journal or elsewhere. Most Forum contributions reflect the writer's desire to take exception to, or otherwise comment on, a specific point raised by the author of an article.

Two recent submissions fit that description to the extent that John Rothman and Bill Moss were stimulated by Jim O'Toole's article in the Winter 1989 issue to offer some considered thoughts of their own on "the idea of permanence." They were inspired to write, however, not so much by disagreement with the previous writer's conclusions as by a desire to think further about, and amplify on, ideas that have been introduced.

When a journal—or, more accurately, one of its authors—succeeds in stimulating such a response, it should provide a place to present that open discussion—a forum, if you will. The two contributions that follow resemble short articles more than letters to the editor. Should other articles stimulate similar future responses, the pages of the Forum are open to such expression. Because space available in those pages is limited, however, writers are encouraged to communicate with the editor about their desire to contribute a more extended essay.

To the Editor:

In connection with the article on Ulrich B. Phillips and the collection of manuscripts in the South (John David Smith, "The Historian as Archival Advocate," Summer 1989), I believe it should be mentioned that one of the early advocates of archive collections was Dr. Franklin Lafayette Riley in Mississippi. Dr. Riley received his training under Herbert Baxter Adams at The Johns Hopkins University and gained the Ph.D. in 1897.

During the first decade of the twentieth century Dr. Riley worked in Mississippi and published several accounts of manuscript materials there. He became a professor at Washington and Lee University in 1914, and I can attest to his continued concern with the preservation of original papers and records. Several times I went with him, one of his sons, and the late Ollinger Crenshaw, on expeditions to houses in Rockbridge County, Virginia, to inquire about and look at groups of old papers reported to be in private possession. Though I was still in high school, that was my first introduction into the manuscript field, and I have continued my interest ever since.

Dr. Riley showed me copies of his publications and spoke about the importance of gathering and caring for original papers. Ollinger Crenshaw was a college student at that time, and, after some while at Johns Hopkins, he joined the Washington and Lee faculty himself. He paved my way to Johns Hopkins and I received my Ph.D. just fifty years ago. In the early 1940s, when I was on the staff of the

Maryland Historical Society, I found there some manuscripts which helped Crenshaw to complete his dissertation and receive his own Ph.D.

This is perhaps a round-about way of describing things, but it does show the result

of Dr. Riley's concern with old records and the extension of that interest to Ollinger Crenshaw and myself, stretching to some ninety years.

WILLIAM D. HOYT
Rockport, Massachusetts

More on the Idea of Permanence

JOHN ROTHMAN

I am looking, once again, at the original Minute Book of the *New-York Daily Times*. A beautiful, heavy book of lined, faintly blue paper, bound in reverse calf, it was restored and deacidified at considerable cost over ten years ago, and now reposes in a specially constructed box in our safe. It contains the "Articles of Association" of 5 August 1851, records of early stock transactions, and the first set of minutes of meetings of the board of directors. Only a few dozen pages are filled; the rest are blank. Whatever information it contains ceased long ago to have any utility; we take it out now only to show to members of the *Times*'s staff on their first tour of our Archives, and to other interested visitors, who admire the box and the binding and the marvelous penmanship of the recording secretary.

Why do we keep this book as part of our "permanent collection," since admittedly it no longer has any utility? Why did my predecessors bother to have it restored, and why did our management approve funds for this purpose? Why, if it was to be retained, wasn't it just microfilmed? And what about the many other documents and objects that, similarly are kept here "permanently" in their original form even though no one ever accesses them for any practical purpose?

These questions were prompted by James O'Toole's thoughtful and thought-provoking article on permanence in the winter 1989 issue of the *American Archivist*, and led to this attempt to provide some answers.

It seems axiomatic that if the value of an

item in an archival collection rests solely in the information it contains, regardless of the physical form in which it is presented, there would be no reason why that information could not be transferred to a more practical form—photocopy, microfilm, digital storage, optical disc, or whatever—if that accomplishes preservation of the information, provides easier access to it, facilitates its dissemination, or a combination of these. (It is true, however, that "hard copy"—paper—is still unmatched for ease of perusal and copying; hence most of our holdings are in paper form.)

Therefore, the reason for retaining and preserving archival materials in their original form must be that they have values other than those inherent in the information they contain. Ruminating about this has suggested that these values may be historic, reliquary, artistic, sentimental, or monetary. Some examples from the *Times* Archives may serve to explain this further; undoubtedly, similar examples can be found in most archival repositories.

1. An item that has any value at all obviously must be retained in its original form if it cannot be reproduced in a way in which that value would be preserved. This would apply to most three-dimensional objects and artifacts. For example, we have the American flag that Admiral Byrd carried on his 1926 flight over the North Pole—a gift from him to the *Times*—and the stick of lead type for the logotype of the *New York Times*. How could these be reproduced?

2. Some items cannot be copied without loss of quality, such as color or legibility, and some might actually incur damage in the process of reproduction. (Try reading microfilm of cables printed or of memos pencilled on poor-quality paper.)

3. Some items have a sentimental value that simply could not be conveyed by a copy, let alone by another medium to which it might be transferred. I think the Minute Book described in the opening paragraph falls into this category: It is the birth certificate and infancy album of the *Times*; and yes, an institution can be, and has a right to be, sentimental about its beginnings.

4. Some items in their original form convey a sense of history, a "feel" for the aura and the context of the material they incorporate, that is unlikely to be conveyed by surrogates. Front pages of the *Times* covering some historic event—Lincoln's assassination, the sinking of the Titanic, Lindbergh's transatlantic flight—do this in a way that images on a microfilm reader or a computer printout of the stories don't, perhaps because they are anachronistic. Similarly, there is a thrill in reading the original notes for and drafts of an important story, statement, or speech, with the deletions and corrections and additions, that is missing in copies and in the final version. I think that the Minute Book falls into this category, also.

5. Archives are often asked to furnish material from their collections for exhibits, and exhibitors usually insist on originals. While I am not sure that the rationale for this has ever been clearly established, it seems to be a fact of life. Archives are disposed—and usually eager—to comply with such requests, as part of their educational, outreach, and public relations programs; and thus must retain and preserve all materials that may be suitable for such exhibits. We have supplied original letters, graphics, photographs, front pages, special sections, and other materials for diverse library, museum, and other exhibits.

Finally, some items have monetary value. These would include manuscripts, handwritten or signed letters and signed photographs by famous people, as well as graphics, other works of art, art objects and artifacts, and items of historic or antiquarian interest. Such items are much sought after in the world of auction houses and collectors, and prices seem to be going only one way—up. Even if archives have no current program for disposing of such items, they owe it to their owners or parent organizations to keep and preserve them in the original—"permanently"—for the day that a policy decision is made to offer them in this marketplace.

John Rothman

The New York Times Company Archives

Disposable Archives in the Interactive Global Village of Hypermedia

WILLIAM W. MOSS

*Marshall McLuhan, he dead;
a penny for the old guy.¹*

*Don't take life so serious;
it ain't no way permanent.²*

In a recent article in the *American Archivist*, James O'Toole took quite seriously

or possibly by Porkypine—in the Walt Kelly comic strip, "Pogo," back in the 1950s. I cannot guarantee the quote, only its gist. My memory fades with rapidly-advancing age, and my cheap pulp copies of Walt Kelly's wonderful works have long-since yellowed, brittle, acidically degenerated, and (alas) returned to dust.

¹The steal and play on T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" are obvious.

²If memory serves, this was said by Pogo Possum—

the notion of permanence.³ Such concern is proper for an archivist. Archives, museums, and libraries are institutions deliberately created to preserve intact things we determine to be of lasting value, things we want not only to know about but to see, hear, touch, and perhaps taste and smell. It is the durable material property of these things, not merely the information in them, nor the idea of them, nor a simulated semblance of them that these institutions are designed and intended to preserve. Despite a current penchant to view these institutions merely as complex information storage, processing, and retrieval mechanisms, they are fundamentally dedicated to preservation of material things as their own best evidence. This basic purpose must not be lost in our excited manipulation of simulated electronic substitutes. Material objects are durable standards of themselves against which variable and transitory notions and simulations of them may be measured for consistency and fidelity to the originals.

The necessity of material things to understanding is rather pre-modern, and therefore somewhat peculiar in a post-modern age that deals in multimedia symbolic information and disinformation flow. Archives are founded upon, and their continued existence is justified on, a presumption that accumulation of knowledge, like accumulation of capital, requires material possessions, the stability and durability of tangible things—permanence. But, just as finance may deal in the semblance of property (trading in obligations on speculation of future gain), so knowledge may deal in the semblance of reality abstracted from primary material evidence. When communications are easy, information plentiful, and symbols accepted uncritically to simulate reality (or even magically chanted to em-

ulate or invoke a desired but unattainable reality), one can escape accountability and may even succeed enormously for a while without ever testing the validity of a premise against primary evidence.

The sheer hydraulic power of streams of communication and information in spate subtly erodes and rechannels our accustomed conceptual geography to compel uncritical acceptance. It carries us too quickly past points of accountability that require leisure, familiarity, and close examination to assure validity. So long as consistency with the flow is the measure of accepting assertions, success is achieved, at least long enough to escape immediately the consequences of inherent weakness. Success comes from skill at shooting rapids, sensing changes in boiling surfaces of streams of information flowing around incongruities, intractable paradoxes, and dilemmas that exist beneath superficial appearances. Strong flow around them makes such obstructions and objections irrelevant. Concentrate on flow, not obstruction. To think “obstruction” is to stop, to lose balance and sense of flow, to be smashed between the hyperbole of conventional wisdom and the tougher propositions it avoids.

Verba volent, litera scripta manet—“spoken words vanish into thin air, but the written word endures.” The last three words of this Latin adage are the motto of the National Archives of the United States, which has an interest in permanence. Like museums, this institution tries to maintain permanence against relentless erosion by streams of data in which volume and rate of flow have value comparable to content. This singular madness places such institutions in a peculiar relationship to the lively, disposable world about them. It is, after all, change and flux that produce the wealth of material property for them to accumulate. The peculiarity does not end here. There is a more fundamental political oddity.

Archives and museums are founded upon, grounded in, and must rely on, perma-

³James M. O'Toole, “On the Idea of Permanence,” *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 10-25.

nence. Permanence seems important to knowledge, particularly to traditional knowledge. The more permanent a thing seems to be, or the more often an event replicates itself without apparent tampering, the more certain is our knowledge of it; at any rate the more confident is our belief in its durability or predictability. Or so it seems, for all is vanity says Ecclesiastes and all is flux according to Heraclitus. But despite the ultimate fragility of transitory existence, which we acknowledge but ignore, confidence in the future seems to require a familiar companionship of things that do not change, in whose shape and substance we can have more than passing confidence. Documents and other material objects are immensely satisfying to this need—muniments, primary evidence, durable legacy.⁴

But permanence is also perverse, for with security comes also bondage through a contract that lurks at least implicitly in archives among nearly all documents. A document is a message, deliberately fixed in a durable medium so it may be transported over distance, through time or space, without appreciable change in message content so it will have its originally intended effect on a recipient. In documents we may dimly discern the atavistic survival of a primordial intent to control. The basic notion of a contract is built upon evidence to justify holding someone else to a prior condition despite change, or to justify mutually-agreed change in a contractual relationship and its conditions. Durable documents provide this evidence. Even a document so far removed from a formal contract as a postcard from a peripatetic relative is evidence of having lived up to an explicit promise to write or a tacit agreement and commitment to main-

tain family ties. This inherent contractual characteristic of documents entwines archives compellingly with the institutionalized power structures that they represent and serve. In the durability of their myriads of documents, archives harbor and cherish evidence of social contract and fidelity to the contract upon which instituted government or corporate authority is based. Their knowledge is of the past, systematically ordered by the power structure itself. Archival accumulation, arrangement, and access serve the contracting authority or contracted obligations of the corporate institution that created its documents. It is on archives that the power of existing authority rests, not on muniments alone but on an attendant complex of interrelated documentation that defines the social context for justifiable authority. It is through appeals to that base of documented contract that corporate institutional authority wields power. It is also by archives that corporate power may be held accountable, provided that its shareholders in commonwealth have access to the records.

Permanence serves the *status quo*. It is perhaps even anti-social. It may be why some people do not like to be photographed or recorded. Being fixed in time, immobile and abstracted from dynamic, evolving reality, closes options. But that's what a document does. It fixes things to endure beyond the wisdom of a moment or even a lifetime, to affect more than one generation, to circumscribe free choice, to bind the future to historic propositions about truth, validity, and reality. Documents imprison institutions and people with the rhetoric of their own past justifications and negotiated terms of existence. A sachem once counselled his people: "Don't let them put you in museums and archives. They put dead things in there, and you are a living people."⁵ He apprehended dichotomy between

⁴This compulsion is not shared universally. Some have stronger faith in flexible oral traditions that bend and survive the winds of change like bamboo to accommodate what did not have to be accounted for in earlier times.

⁵Orren Lyons, Chief and Truthkeeper of the On-

a fluid social world, in which precedent is advisory, a liberal option for the wise, and a legalistic world in which precedent binds the future to the past through constitutions, statutes, and treaties. We are a government of laws and not of men.

Now comes hypermedia, the dynamic integration of forms of communication, information storage and retrieval, and data manipulation in multimedia technology, the ultimate optical-digital discotheque.⁶ It is flux. The very technology upon which hypermedia builds is fluid, headed in uncertain directions to deliberately diffuse ends. Hypermedia is fleeting sensory impressions, accumulating elusive tendencies and approximations, themselves subject to instant deflection by new sensations. It warps our space. MTV, Lebanon, commodities exchange, junk bonds, Congress, and presidential candidates all packaged to endure for mere microbytes of sound and sight in blitzkrieg time. It is rumor and gossip, social, political, and immediate. Hypermedia relies not on scientific or judicial analysis but on instinct, on subtle subconscious aesthetic patternings for accumulation and interpretation of randomly acquired bits and clumps of data. It is sufficient unto itself, now, present reality and immediate utility. Instead of referring to individual documents in sequential arrangement for content and detail, we will scan ever-changing information streams to sift and refine from them not concrete detail but sensitivity to change in rate and direction of flow and use that as basis for action. We will surf upon flow. We will

avoid and disdain analysis that detaches discrete parts from complex context to examine slices of universal flux.

Hypermedia is impermanent; it makes document impertinent, anachronistic by definition. Hypermedia is the antithesis of archives. Document/archives is a human attempt to corral reality, to make it hold still long enough for comfort and security, if not to impose our will upon it. To document, to archive is to conserve. Because it was so, so should it be, in the beginning, now, and ever, world without end, amen. You promised. We have a covenant. You must keep your promise, even if conditions have changed so that fulfillment no longer makes the good sense it once did. Recorded contract becomes an issue of will and power. No longer a trial to debate and decide the outcome of a promissory process, it determines who wins the strongest position to deal with an unpredictable, rapidly-emerging future. Hypermedia subverts the power of archives to domesticate wild, fluid, social reality. But every archives has within it the seeds of its own destruction. We document preferences among alternatives, seeking to sustain those choices through time. But, by the mere assertion of choice, by embedding choice in archives themselves, we thereby beg the question of alternatives. Every contract, after all, is subject to renegotiation and amendment. The very assertion of each preference tempts us to seek whatever advantage may arise in its implicit alternatives as the world about the archives inevitably changes.

Archives are integral to institutional foundation and establishment. They embody institutional self-definition and record corporate self-justification. Archives also nurture seeds of change and self-destruction, inherent vice. Even those proudest of institutional archives sometimes suspect them to be confoundingly subversive. Indeed, some so fear archives that they shred documents. Institutions are dynamic, evolving organisms that con-

andaga, at a workshop on oral history and archives, annual meeting of the National Congress of American Indians, Phoenix, Arizona, 1986. The quotation is from personal memory, so it is probably imprecise; but the author was there, heard him, and vouches for the accuracy of the sentiment expressed.

⁶See Andrew Pollack's "An Avalanche of Information is Coming to Video Screens," *New York Times* 9 July 1989 [page, alas, lost somewhere in disposable archives, but locatable by anyone with access to the *New York Times* index; *sic transit gloria hypermedia*.

stantly, continuously escape their own foundations.

The only way that institutions (and their archives) can escape change is to be irrelevant; worthless as means to pervert original intent for present purpose, and unnecessary to defend institutional tradition against revolt. Furthermore, a monastic archives that conserves and insulates past from dynamic present, although protected from contaminating change, deprives present ignorance of the opportunity to be informed by past wisdom. Archives are also means to conserve species of knowledge threatened with extinction by spates of new ideas or by the corruption of perverted orthodoxy. They are reservoirs, wildidea refuges for the regeneration and reintroduction of endangered concepts back into ecosystems of human discourse and understanding. To do so effectively in the environment of hypermedia takes care, skill, and not a little luck. Ideas may no longer be introduced *ex cathedra* by authority of guildmaster scholars and craftsmen to disciples and apprentices. There is no apostolic succession in hypermedia. Ideas must find their way intoandthroughstreamof-consciousness communication to new breeding grounds of minds preoccupied with car sales, computer games, drug wars, cor-

porate raiding, footbasebasketball, and electronic mail. Ideas loosed from the wild-idea reserve of archive can no longer be nurtured or controlled by truth keepers who cannot know or understand what happens to them in the new wild. Leap of faith takes on new meaning. Send your preschooler to the store down the block past the drug dealers because there's no one else to go.

In the beginning was not *logos*, the enduring word, but unstable, unpredictable *chaos*.⁷ Into the chaos of hypermedia, archival and institutional conservators of documented history reintroduce endangered ideas, *logos*, to uncertain fate, to surf the air waves, integrated circuits, and HDTV of a new religion of hypermedia.

Totally tubular!

Cowabunga!

Fax me a pizza, Mr. Domino,

I'm cabled to the Source!

Beam me up, Scotty,

I'm tuned to the Force!

William W. Moss is the director of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

⁷The opening verse of the Gospel according to St. John, "In the beginning was the word . . ." [in "archai" was "logos"], here transformed into "In the beginning was chaos."

Standards for Archival Description

Editor's note:

Increasing recognition that archival description involves a complex relationship between the materials being described, a repository's internal finding aids, and information shared through a national database led to a 1988-89 project to consider how the implementation of standards might improve the quality of archival description. The resulting report and recommendations of the Working Group on Standards for Archival Description appeared in the Fall 1989 (volume 52 number 4) issue.

During its first meeting in December 1988, the Working Group established a three-dimensional framework for its subsequent work that is represented by the matrix discussed in the report. Individual members were then assigned to study the issues and problems associated with various parts of that matrix, as illustrated in figure 1. The ten background papers that they prepared are presented in this special section.

In terms familiar to archivists, printing the background papers in the issue after the one containing the report and recommendations may have violated the original or-

der, but it reveals the project's provenance by presenting the research that informed the report and recommendations. It also mimics the familiar pattern of an archival inventory: begin with a general overview in the historical sketch and the scope and content note; then describe the contents of individual series in greater detail.

What follows is the Working Group's equivalent of series descriptions—more intense analysis of specific issues that were summarized and integrated in the report and recommendations. Inevitably, their specialized focus will limit the audience for individual papers. Not every archivist feels a burning desire to master the bewildering acronyms and abbreviations of standards organizations, for example, but collectively the profession will profit from ready access to the papers.

Readers should recognize that the background papers were written as contributions to a group project; they are, in effect, works in progress. They have been edited to include citations of recently completed work and to provide more introductory explanations for a broader audience than was

Figure 1. Background Papers Prepared for Second Meeting

	Technical Standards	Conventions	Guidelines	
INFORMATION SYSTEMS	Walch	Walch		External
	Hickerson	Hickerson	Hickerson	Internal
DATA STRUCTURES	Walch	Weber	Szary	External
	Roe	Roe	Roe Stout	Internal
DATA CONTENTS	Thibodeau	Matters		External
		Matters Dryden		Internal
DATA VALUES	Thibodeau	Ostroff		External
		Ostroff Dryden		Internal

necessary when writing exclusively for the members of the Working Group, but the substance of the papers has not been al-

tered. Readers may benefit from referring to the glossary and other features of the report included in the Fall 1989 issue.