

From the Guest Editor*

Introduction to 2020 Vision

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2020 VISION PRESENTS PERSPECTIVES on change during the next few decades from four experts who provide feature articles and from a dozen leading archivists who comment on and interpret the meaning of these changes for the archival profession. The papers and commentaries published here were presented in a series of five sessions at the 1992 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Montreal. Feature articles by Ronald Weissman, director of strategic marketing at NeXT Computer, Inc.; Tora Bikson, senior scientist at the RAND Corporation; Ramon Gutierrez, chair of the Ethnic Studies Department at University of California at San Diego; and Peter Lyman, director of libraries at the University of Southern California, address the major changes that archivists should expect in technology, organization structure, society and culture, and research. For each key article, there is a brief introduction and

commentaries by two archivists. Hugh Taylor, a consulting archivist, weaves together the themes of the feature articles and commentaries in a wrap-up essay.

Technological change is the most pervasive theme of 2020 Vision; it is the central topic of Weissman's paper and a point of departure for Bikson's analysis of organizational change and Lyman's article on trends in research. A clear picture emerges of the overall trends—technology is becoming less expensive and more portable, more flexible to use, more interactive, and more integrated. Bikson explains that integration is occurring both within computer workstations (as information moves from application to application) and between workstations (as information moves from person to person). Weissman describes technology trends in much the same way. He predicts that the first fundamental change in the basic model of information processing since the 1970s will occur during the next decade when work processes will become information or document centered

*Lawrence Dowler of Harvard University also served as a guest editor on this special issue.

rather than focused on software tools and applications. Individuals and groups will work on problems, bringing a wide variety of information and information management tools to the work at hand rather than structuring tasks around the available information and tools, as is often the case today in what pass for highly automated environments.

One implication of this change is that the potential exists to make information more accessible, more useful, and better suited to repetitive administrative tasks and complex research problems. Increasingly sophisticated software tools will enable users to concentrate on tasks and problems and to retrieve information and communicate with colleagues through local and global networks. Peter Lyman provides a particularly poignant example when he explains how electronic journals of scholarly research will likely provide results and the interpretation of raw data, as well as pointers to the data or original sources on which the research was based. The electronic journal would more closely represent the research process and, in this sense, make every publication an archives or a pointer to an archives.

Authors of the main articles generally agree that standards and expectations for access to and delivery of information are on the rise. Computer technology has provided the potential for network access and global communications for several years, but the most significant change is the extent to which this potential is being actualized. Users will expect rapid access to records and information in “meaning-rich” formats delivered to any requestor anywhere on the globe. Several speakers urge the archival profession to exploit the potential of information technology, and Weissman illustrates that technology is not “self-implementing” with a description of his recent visit to the State Archives in Florence, Italy. At the same time, both Lyman and Bikson point out that new tools evolve rap-

idly, but institutions change much more slowly—including the institutions that distribute information and the organizations that create, manage, and use it.

Commenting on Weissman’s article, Luciana Duranti and John McDonald disagree about whether the object-oriented, document-centered, networked, and virtual repositories of the future represent a researcher’s heaven or hell or an unrealized opportunity for archivists to redefine their role and value to organizations and society. Joan Warnow-Blewett, in her commentary on Bikson’s analysis of organizational change, presents a fascinating case study of research in high-energy physics that is international in scope and multi-institutional and that already uses advanced electronic communications to enable collaborative research on a grand scale. Victoria Walch reminds us that archivists are beginning to use advanced information technology for individual and cooperative work, and she encourages archival organizations to exploit the new technologies to become more open and democratic and to foster geographically dispersed communication, learning, and work.

The 2020 Vision articles also explore a second set of themes—how the institutions and concepts that have defined the boundaries of identity and social activity for centuries are changing rapidly at the end of the twentieth century. This is a central theme in Ramon Gutierrez’s article on social and cultural trends, but similar thoughts are echoed in all of the main articles. The meaning and significance of such defining factors as space, location, organization, hierarchy, kinship, and even the body are eroding rapidly, and a great uncertainty exists about the concepts and institutions that will take their place.

Among the feature articles, there is a unanimous belief that the emergence of a global economy is fundamentally altering the world we inhabit. The multinational corporation, with little respect for national

boundaries or local cultures, is on the ascendancy. International networks enable global communication that were only imagined a decade ago. The nation-state that gave rise to legal traditions, geographic boundaries, and administrative consistency is being torn apart by the competing tensions of globalism and localism. Equally important, but perhaps less obvious, is the extremely mobile global population created by recent political upheavals in nation-states and the push and pull of a global economy. National political institutions, organizations, corporations, and localities, which have formed the locus for collecting and organizing archives, are disintegrating, evolving rapidly into new organizational forms, or disappearing altogether.

Social, cultural, and organizational change will not be limited to the structures on which archivists have relied for a sense of stability. Some of the basic concepts that archivists have used as organizing concepts for knowledge and for our own work are being undermined by changes in the world around us and in the way society looks at the world. Gutierrez's essay helps us explore how neat dichotomous categories, such as male/female, native/foreign, and public/private, are themselves constructs of a historical era and are being rejected or redefined by people who find them outmoded, oppressive, or too confining for the global environment.

Peter Lyman describes a similar process among scholarly disciplines, which have been tools for organizing research methodologies, professions, and knowledge. Using the example of feminist studies, Lyman explains how traditional disciplinary paradigms are challenged by clients of research and by scholars who find them too limiting. Scholars constantly redefine what constitutes acceptable evidence for use in research as they build new research methods, demand access to new types of sources, and construct new disciplines. Yet this process has accelerated in recent years as scholars have challenged power, authority,

and control within academia and as information technology presents new possibilities to share, organize, and disseminate information.

These themes raise fundamental questions about the nature of recorded documentation, memory, and history. Gutierrez's article and Taylor's wrap-up stress how Western society has relied on the sense of sight, visual representations, and the written word to signify memory and convey the meaning of the past at the expense of other senses and other forms of documentation. Nancy Sahli, Debra Newman Ham, Larry Dowler, and Constance Gould, in their comments on the articles by Gutierrez and Lyman, portray how archives are filled with only a small and unrepresentative slice of the written word which transmits highly selected information and knowledge to future generations.

What does all this mean for archivists who must reassess the nature of *the record* amidst the pressures of a transformation in recording technologies and scholars' search for entirely new types of evidence? There is a tension, and ample fuel for debate, between those who assume that archives exist primarily to preserve authentic and reliable evidence of organizational transactions for the practical benefit of society and those who encourage archivists to expand their definition of evidence and think imaginatively about its possible uses. Will archives become deluged with more documentation than we can ever imagine, let alone preserve (much of it consisting of "sediment" or "electronic chatter")? Or will archives be forced to focus on the essential—the rarest and most valuable records—and the information critical to survival, such as locations of nuclear waste sites that must remain identified for ten thousand years or longer? The 2020 Vision essays force archivists to confront these very basic questions about the purpose and value of archives.

Among the authors of the four main articles there is a recurring refrain about the

value and significance of archives, evolving from their own perspectives as historians, researchers, innovators, and administrators. One could easily conclude that archives are becoming unnecessary or irrelevant in this period of rapid change when archivists can hardly imagine how to exploit the potential of technology and when the institutions and concepts that have served as anchors for archives are themselves at sea. Yet readers should not be discouraged by the profound challenges we face. It is clear that archives will not become irrelevant unless archivists make them so. The authors of the 2020 Vision papers teach us this lesson.

Tora Bikson, in one example, captures the vitality of the role of archives when she explains that archivists and records managers are not alone in their interest in being able to document and understand new organizational forms. Rather, she says “organizational memory and organizational learning are presently regarded as matters of profound strategic concern at the highest levels of management; they should also become matters of action.” Competent management of information resources is a survival issue for postindustrial organizations. Weissman reminds us that as users’ expectations rise, archivists face a great challenge in providing exhaustive access to meaning-rich archival sources. Lyman assumes that scholars in the archives of 2020 will seek to understand such profound problems as the limits of state power, nationalism and ethnicity, and the emergence of new sources of group cohesion. And archives can provide fertile soil for such research because they have the potential to transcend national boundaries, academic disciplines, and the vagaries of the moment. Underlying all of this is a recognition that we are living through a rare historical epoch—a watershed period—of fundamental change in human society. Whatever else archivists accomplish, we have a basic responsibility to capture, in all of their mul-

tiples forms, records that represent memory and will enable scholars to construct a history of the profound changes we are witnessing in nation states, technology, organizations, and personal identity.

The outside experts and several commentators relied on history for their perspectives about the future and stressed the future’s unpredictable nature. Weissman’s projections are limited to the next decade, because he explains that predictions about technology further ahead than eight to ten years are futile. One major breakthrough in any aspect of computer technology could render present-day forecasts irrelevant. Lyman reaches back to Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* of 1620 to begin his analysis, and Gutierrez uses the voyage of Columbus to reflect in rich detail on present deep discontinuities in concepts as basic as space and time and in the construction and representation of knowledge. Bikson points out that our understanding of organizational change lags behind changes that have already occurred and that will continue to evolve at a rapid pace.

Perhaps a key lesson, at least for immediate discussion, is that archivists must expect and prepare for change in society, in the organizations where we work, and in our own profession. We will not be able to control many of these changes and we may not be able to predict change very well, but we can learn to manage change better. In our search for ways to understand and cope with change, archivists should be inspired by Hugh Taylor’s exquisite summary of the papers and commentaries. Taylor extols the value of archives in their multitude of media and forms, reaching the widest possible audience not only to convey a sense of heritage but also to provide the grist for exhibition, celebration, and lively social events. He calls for an overarching cosmology with a spiritual dimension to guide archivists as they help society save the records it needs to ensure survival and to nurture cultural, social, and personal

regeneration. Taylor urges archivists to meet and to discuss and learn from the ideas generated through the papers, commentary, and discussion in the 2020 Vision sessions at the Montreal meeting. 2020 Vision will not

be a success unless we heed his advice. In Montreal, Hugh Taylor had the last word on 2020 Vision, but I am sure he would agree that his should not be the final word.