Conclusion

Some Concluding Thoughts

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WE HAVE COME TO THE END of what I believe is a remarkable undertaking by a society of archivists attempting to understand the course of the profession in the immediate and more distant future. Their exercise is probably unique. Each day the weighty themes underwent a process of distillation, and the papers presented here reveal the gleaming contents of their alembics. Am I now to play the alchemist and transmute these refined papers into the pure gold of wisdom? I am, of course, defeated from the onset: I cannot turn gold into gold or into more gold. All I can do is offer a few observations and try and set these papers in as broad a frame as I can, a frame that has no margin and no center, the frame of a renewed and electronically extended orality.

Incipit verbum—"In the beginning was the word." As heir to thousands of years of communication through the human voice; the will to speak is basic to the way we express ourselves. All that was necessary for the continuity of our cultures was once carried in our heads and passed down to each generation by mnemon, griot, shaman, and elder through myth, epic, and ritual. Orality as transmitter yielded grudgingly to the power of the written record and the illusion of human memory, and particularly the "collective memory" in archives and libraries. In one form or another, literacy saw the emergence of the bureaucratic state translating speech into materials and weapons of command and control, into patriarchy and the building of empires. An ancient myth has it that, when the letters of the phonetic alphabet were sown as seeds, they sprang up armed men.

Speech, unless embedded in the record and transmuted by it, lost much of its authority to the written word which, as developed by the Greeks, stimulated abstract thought, analysis, psychic detachment, and the pursuit of science as we know it, which has helped shape the Western world and, by extension, the remainder of the globe.

However, the price we have paid in setting ourselves over against nature in a vast dichotomy has been devastating.

We are heirs to both the integrated wisdom of ancient orality and the fractured knowledge of literacy. They both struggle within us and are implicit in the presentations of all our speakers; Peter Lyman expresses this as "the monological quality of print" which "distorts the social nature of knowledge." Features of each medium of record that has emerged, together with forms of verification—so essential to the archival record of the future, as Luciana Duranti has demonstrated—have been carried forward and seem destined to reappear in different guises. The scribe who tapped his generalized stylus into the soft clay tablets of the Ancient World reappears as the typist tapping the specialized letters of the alphabet onto paper, and returns to a generalized punch into cards of early main frame computer applications. Microfilm mimics the parchment roll and inherits similar retrieval problems. The credit card is our seal matrix, which we combine with our signature in transmitting the message of our spending. The electronic stylus and tablet evokes the ancient world. As we move away from the counting and accounting applications of the 1960s (which mirror the initial value of the clay tablets), we are moving into an era of what I call, rather clumsily, neo-orality, during which we will begin to experience a more integrated culture through the power of the present and subsequent generations of automation. We have learned the hard way that we must forever bring our past into the present if we are to explain both and thereby experience the power of myth.

Many features of oral discourse are apparent in the immediacy of automated responses, the capability for instant interactive communication, together with the collegial aspects of e-mail, voice mail, and networking. We learned from Ronald Weissman of the impending movement away from disparate software applications with their attendant files to a capacity for object-oriented integrated search with its "plain paper" document approach, whereby information is built up on the screen by the user with or without input by others in a network. Surely this is one aspect of the way in which the human brain works when processing information and preparing it for utterance? He spoke of making the products of modern information technology as easy to comprehend as a paperback book, and so we bring forward the whole literate and print tradition along with our electronic metaphor for orality into the formatting of applications for information retrieval and display. Meanwhile, the imperative to speak, as the most ancient form of communication, drives us to the control of computer applications by voice and gesture.

We also bring forward into automation the whole range of images and symbols over and above text, which is itself highly symbolic, as semiotics has clearly shown. Whereas the manuscripts of the classical world were dumped immediately into the new medium of print (and some would argue that this delayed the onset of the modern age), all media of record, both text and image, known to the archivist and librarian are now being dumped into the computer with increasingly high resolution. This process can, when necessary, enhance a deteriorated original and, as it were, arrest time. It seems to me imperative that archivists come to learn how the nature of the various media affect our perceptions of meaning and, therefore, our appraisal decisions. The media are change agents as well as carrier pigeons. It will not be sufficient for specialists in one medium, such as photo archivists, to have this understanding; all archivists must have it because automation will integrate the retrieval of all media. The entire media spectrum may be revealed in a complex search, whereby the user could require guidance and explanation by the archivist to indi-

cate that images may not be what they seem.[1]

With all these swirling galaxies of information, so well reviewed by Weissman and Lyman as being at the future researcher's disposal, content and context can easily be separated, as they point out. This will be another major problem for archivists, for whom documents could be likened to the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland,* where in the end all that remained was the smile. With much of the material, maybe all we will need is the smile, but it will not be archival. Much of it may be just electronic chatter or gossip. Moreover, context will have to mean much more than jurisdictional provenance (as in a department) and original order, but also the context of the function and activity recorded in sources elsewhere, whether in public- or private-sector documents, printed books, or other artifacts. For instance, records of nuclear power and nuclear weapons should include those of the protesters, not to mention the location of waste sites, which have to remain identified for ten thousand years or more. Increasingly, we must focus not only on related social and technological structure but on the activities that fill the space between them. The ancient oral societies learned from the actions of gods and heroes, not from abstract virtues and vices, and we are again paying more attention to the acts and deeds that lie behind and within the structure and the document that may mask them.

Technologies are themselves structural, whether material, organizational, or mental, and it has become clear that, as both archivists and citizens, we need to use more appropriate technology that emphasizes human mediation. Technological change outruns organizational change, especially in corporate office systems. Tora Bikson, John McDonald, and David Bearman have all stressed the opportunity for archivists to stop the hemorrhaging of valuable information. Ursula Franklin's distinction between holistic and prescriptive forms of technology is most telling.[2] Automation used effectively and holistically has eroded much of the old and highly prescriptive division of labor and has flattened bureaucratic hierarchies to provide more personal responsibility and freedom in the execution of tasks. Tora Bikson has further pointed out that business structures have been under great stress when the need for "bottom-line" supervision and control conflicts with this new freedom. Characteristically new, active configurations are not reflected in organizational charts, which have not yet caught up with reality. Too much is often left to technical experts and consultants, who do not understand local specifics. They speak of "re-engineering," an unhappy metaphor from the age of steam. Public sector bureaucracies and archivists have the same problems: command and control structures with their military terminology are basically the same everywhere when they are driven and fed by paper, and we have tended very often to forget that neither the structure of the institution nor the physical description of the records necessarily defines process or "what is going on." This is only the architecture, as it were, for activity and the record of activity. The use of the term *architecture* in automation is most appropriate—the more sophisticated the architect, the more space and flexibility there is for and between transactions. We would do well to pay more attention to the space and less to the structure.

[1]For instance, there is no known record on film of "dog fights" in the air during the First World War. The footage that survived is mostly from early feature films such as *Hell's Angels* and *Dawn Patrol*. For this and other examples, see Peter Robertson, "More Than Meets the Eye," *Archivaria* 2 (Summer 1976): 33–43.

[2]Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology* (Montreal: CBC Enterprises, 1990), 11–35.

With regard to appropriate technology, our craft up to now has been notably holistic in that we each perform all archival operations on documentary material assigned to us, in contrast to the prescriptive librarians who, by the nature of printed books, suffer from divisions of labor which can be irksome. It is essential that we develop our skill so we do not allow the system to diminish the person in our relationship with the user.

Information pervades every aspect of life on this planet. Our human information, resulting from the capacity for reflection, is part of a continuum that links the whole of environmental recycling to sustainable agriculture; through information passed among the DNA, genes, and chromosomes; and through plant and animal life, all of which is available for our use if we do not destroy it. We are a species like any other and, at the same time, we are presently the most dangerous. Ramón Gutiérrez is most convincing when he discusses how we try to distinguish ourselves from one another through the myths of bodily characteristics in the face of an imperative toward one planetary society of humans that must ultimately live in harmony with all life. Are we then to have no local allegiances? I believe our allegiances may ultimately be to the bioregion whose inhabitants become grounded in the natural continuity of climate, topography, and life forms[3] and supported by appropriate technology which, to use Weissman's phrase, is not self-generating and has to be created. Lyman's example of the water supply in Bali is to the point.

There are already implications here for the archivist who will increasingly be concentrating on saving the record of what society needs as opposed to what it would like to preserve, which is very much the case at present. Increasingly, we have to retain not only the vital personal records, the people's evidence in support of their rights and freedoms, but evidence of that which may in the long run place our life and culture in jeopardy: nuclear waste sites, for example, and other forms of pollution, together with the evidence of inappropriate technology that has failed and of successful regenerative activity. As archivists we may have to negotiate vigorously for the preservation and availability of this kind of material, supported by the political actions of lobbies and pressure groups doing "citizen science."[4] Weissman rather gives the impression that by compression we will be able to keep what we need *and* what we would like, but materials that are hardware dependent are always at the mercy of obsolescence. We will have to make decisions about the most stable media physically and in terms of hardware.

In his commentary on Peter Lyman's paper, Lawrence Dowler warns us that, because our present structures and institutions are textually based, we may be blind to the nature of nationhood, authority, the nature of other forms of communication, and other ways of knowing, which will affect our appraisal decisions. Archives are not kept only for history, yet this is the popular view even among archivists. We need, according to Dowler, new conceptual and institutional models for research which are less histor-

[3]Bioregionalism has been defined as "learning to live within the carrying capacity of a region and developing a sense of place." See Kirkpatrick Sale, *Dwellers in the Land: the Bioregional Vision* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1991). Society is a long way yet from putting this vision into practice or even accepting the definition of such regions, but the 49th Parallel, for example, clearly cuts across many of them, however defined.

[4]"Citizen science" has played a large part in the debate over nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Volunteers in nongovernmental organizations challenged the military research agenda and attitudes stimulated by the Cold War. Information was viewed as property, which the articulate opposition (made up of Peter Lyman's organic intellectuals) has the greatest difficulty in obtaining to build their case, quite apart from its technical nature.

ically orientated and embrace all forms of media, including museum artifacts, which contain much information related to our work.

Most of the discourse so far has dealt with macrocosmic dimensions, but what about the microcosm—the local community, family, and individual—and their needs? We are liable to lose sight of them at the planetary level. In Canada today, and probably in the United States also, there are hundreds of small archives for every large one. These small archives are vital centers of local heritage in all its forms, where the document becomes a powerfully evocative artifact. They are accepted and valued by an increasing number of people—not for reasons of nostalgia, and not for their great wealth of research material, but for a sense of place in a constantly moving society without traditional roots or racial or national continuity. These archives could have access to centers of research as the micro-macro relationship develops, but this may not be their principal role since these sources will be available to individuals in their own homes, where electronic compression may also see more family records stored than in the past.

There is presently a disturbing trend in Canada whereby provincial archives are forced, for reasons of economy, to reduce drastically or to cease altogether the accessioning of material from the private sector, which hitherto had been their custom. With relatively few university archives and others of the "middling sort," this is presenting real problems, which automation and compression may overcome. The United States seems to be better served in this regard through its state historical societies and a number of universities and institutes with significant archival programs.

For David Bearman, writing in his *Archival Methods*, the recordkeeper of the future will embody the archivist and historian in the reemergence of an ancient oral tradition: "The storytellers and chroniclers were not passive custodians of the heritage but active interpreters and teachers, responsible for weaving the knowledge of the past into the pattern of the age in which they lived. . . . Our role is more closely akin to that of the storyteller remaking the past in a fashion more relevant to our time,"[5] and not keeping all material from a distant past into an indefinite future. The deterioration of traditional records, the cost of media transference and the nature of automated compound documents will likely make this impossible anyway.

"What, then, of the historian?" you may ask. I do not believe archivists should become academic historians, but we should continue to serve historians as we do now, while recognizing the widest possible range of audience and giving all users a sense of heritage, of being a part of the planetary action. In doing so, we should not hesitate to join with museums, galleries, theaters, and festivals. We should provide not only for research and exhibition but also for celebrations and lively social events.

The necessity of archivists to limit accession to the documents that are needed will challenge the skill of historians to create scholarly, coherent accounts, comparable to their success with the limited records of the Middle Ages, while using for their research a wide range of media, in which some resources may be available only in electronic formats. Lyman's "organic intellectuals" are likely to contribute significantly to the new fields of research.

And so to our vision. If we are to live effectively and creatively in the new paradigm, which all the authors in this issue endorse in their own way, we have to become more balanced in the use of our brains. Centuries of literacy and print have all but resulted in a Faustian pact that can be re-

[5]David Bearman, "Recorded Memory and Cultural Continuity," *Archival Methods*, Archives and Museums Informatics Technical Report, no. 9 (1989), 59.

solved only by greater use of our holistic, artistic, symbolic, intuitive, emotional, and, yes, playful right brain over our sequential, analytic, reductionist, and intellectual left brain. I personally believe that we need once more an overarching cosmology with a spiritual dimension, if we are to have something approaching 20/20 vision.[6] Neil Postman has remarked that museums should answer the question, "What does it mean to be a human being?"[7] In answering the question, each museum should offer a different facet of the human condition. Perhaps this is a good question for archives to confront as well.

[6]One such cosmology has been defined as "a scientific story about the origins of our universe; mysticism, which is a psychic response to our being in the universe; and art, which translates science and mysticism into images that awaken body, soul and society. A cosmology needs all three elements to come alive: it is our joyful response (mysticism) to the awesome fact of our being in the universe (science) and our expression of that response by the art of our lives and citizenship (art)." Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 1, note.

[7]Neil Postman, "Museum as Dialogue," *Museum News* 69 (September–October, 1990): 55.