Presidential Address

Expanding the Foundation

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Abstract: The archival profession today is doubly challenged. Not only must we deal with dramatic increases in the volume and complexity of paper records, we must also develop programs and strategies for electronic records. The latter, in particular, will require years of research, analysis, testing, and development. However, the resources needed to support years of intensive work in multiple archival settings are not present. The author contends that the profession's most pressing need is the development of greater infrastructure to support research efforts, and she offers examples of the types of organizations that we need to foster.

THE STORY IS TOLD of an exchange of letters between Winston Churchill and George Bernard Shaw. When Churchill was a young and relatively unknown member of Parliament, he received an envelope containing tickets to a play. Enclosed with the tickets was the following note from Shaw: "Dear Mr. Churchill, I hope you can attend the opening night of my new play. I enclose four tickets so that you might bring friends—if you have any." To this the young Winston, with equal grace, replied: "My Dear Mr. Shaw, I regret that I have other commitments on the opening night of your play. However, I should be delighted to attend on the second night—if there is one."

This story highlights the two issues I wish to focus on tonight, friends and staying power. They are two things that we as a profession have but at the same time do not have. I believe that the manner and degree in which we possess these two have influenced our development, our status, and our role in society. Further, I believe these two factors will significantly affect our future, both as a profession and as a force in the Information Age.

What do I mean, archivally speaking, by "friends" and "staying power"? By "friends" I refer to allies who are not archivists but who actively support us; by "staying power" I mean the resources *over time* to analyze, resolve, and ultimately articulate to the larger society the answers to our most vexing problems. It is crucial that we manage this; it is not certain that we will.

The uncertainty reflects the magnitude of our challenge. We are in the midst of a mighty change, one that incorporates whole new areas of professional endeavor without the loss of any previous area. Some have urged us to shed traditional activities, assuming instead new roles and responsibilities. These arguments have not succeeded, and indeed they cannot in the short term. We must continue to survey and schedule records; take physical custody of materials appraised as archival; and arrange and describe the paper, the microfilm, the audio- and videotapes, the maps, and the photographs that in combination represent the great bulk of our holdings. We still service the on-site researcher, assist with commemorative events, support oral history, and develop the occasional exhibit.

It is in addition to these traditional roles that we add that of comprehending and conquering the electronic record. Rather than refocusing our efforts, we are redoubling them. Instead of repackaging solutions, we are rethinking them. In addition to improving our product, we are creating new product lines. The Information Age is pushing archivists into an unprecedented expansion of professional endeavor. The challenges are conceptual, technical, procedural, and political. We are asking such difficult questions as:

- How do we define the term *records* in relation to electronic technologies?
- How do we manage complex compound documents as a logical entity?
- How do we incorporate archival concerns into the process for setting technical standards?
- How do we influence systems design to assure the integrity of records over time and across technologies?
- How do we make our voices heard on privacy, copyright, and freedom of information?
- How do we bring archival issues into the debate on government information policy?
- How do we implement the virtual archives?

Margaret Hedstrom has noted that "the research needed to respond effectively to electronic records issues will be time-consuming, expensive, and complex."[1] If we

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[1]Margaret Hedstrom, "Understanding Electronic Incunabula: A Framework for Research on Electronic Records," *American Archivist* 54 (Summer 1991): 339.

add information policy to electronic records issues, the problems double. Yet we lack time, money, and, therefore, the tools to conduct exploratory research or complex analysis. That we have accomplished so much is a tribute to the highly dedicated and productive group among us who are grappling with these issues. In the end, however, our current level of effort will be insufficient. While fully acknowledging the extraordinary work that has been accomplished, I nonetheless fear for our collective future. We lack the tools, the resources, the friends, and the staying power to meet the challenges before us.

In short, we lack infrastructure. We lack funding sources, institutional bases, research teams, and public interest groups. As a profession we are appallingly short on these mainstays of focused endeavor. Other professions, including some that are related to archives, have many such structures supporting their progress. We should look closely at these examples. We should emulate them.

I am speaking of the commissions, councils, centers, and institutes that promote causes and sustain research. These bodies are goal-setting and resource-allocating mechanisms. They are protectors and promulgators of social, cultural, or professional positions; they are explorers of new methods and approaches; and they are influential articulators of values and ideas. They are what we need. They are what we lack.

Permit me some examples. In addition to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), we need a Council on Archival Resources. In addition to the Bentley Library Fellows Program, we need an Institute for Records and Information Policy. Instead of committees, the occasional grant, and individual efforts, the profession needs a Center for Information, Technology, and the Government Record, a National Com-

mission on Documentation Strategies, a Foundation for our Documentary Heritage. Religious archivists need a Center for the Records of Belief. Business archivists need a National Conference for the Corporate Record. We all need a public interest group that monitors legal and legislative actions affecting records policy.

I could continue this litany of organization names. The archival horizons I imagine are extensive. They encompass a wide range of focused organizations that are distinct from but complementary to each other. These groups pursue particular areas of professional endeavor, or respond to differing needs within the profession, and they do so with vigor, intelligence, and resources.

Rather than looking to one funding agency, one committee, one research agenda, or one professional association to solve complex problems, we should foster instead an environment of competition. Rather than accept the scarcity of our resources, we should take action to change our condition. Numerous groups undertaking analysis of a common problem, each from their own perspective, will be more likely to consider the range of associated issues, identify a variety of approaches, produce a more rapid resolution, and have a stronger societal impact than will any single organization taking a single approach.

Further, specialized groups speak with authority. When the National Security Archive speaks on government declassification issues, it does so with knowledge, experience, and a sophisticated approach to dealing with the media. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) may well be interested in—and have members who are knowledgeable about—declassification, but SAA is interested in many archival issues. No one issue is likely to merit consistent attention for extended periods of time. The National Security Archive, with its single focus, has a clear advantage in researching

issues, identifying options, and presenting its position.

The same is true for other interest groups that seek to influence public policy. OMB Watch (Office of Management and Budget) has more impact on information policy than does SAA because OMB Watch is a daily player in this effort, not an occasional commenter. The same is true in their respective areas for the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom; for the National Humanities Alliance, the Commission on Preservation and Access, and, the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History. Their sharper focus creates a stronger base over a longer period of time in support of their concerns and positions.

SAA does have a significant role to play, and we should do more to assert our views and to address research and policy issues. The greatest contribution SAA can make, however, is to increase the number of voices, bases, and options for professional advancement. At one time I believed that our greatest need was to create a kind of archival Brookings Institution—a thinktank that consisted of a prominent board, a core staff of researchers, stable funding, and a team approach to problem solving. I still believe we need such an institution, but I now think that no single organization will or can meet the profession's needs. We must develop multiple options, multiple sources of support, multiple views of our problems and issues.

So how do we get there? We get there by specific people doing specific things. I have some suggestions. Would not the University of Maryland, with its History and Library Science (HILS) program, its emphasis on information systems, and its proximity to the new National Archives at College Park, be the obvious home for a center focusing on information, technology, and the government record? Washington's attention to information infrastructure and our profession's knowledge of infor-

mation and record structures create a natural symbiosis for the University of Maryland to nurture and sustain.

Business archivists: your combined efforts can produce a National Conference for the Corporate Record. Think about it. The business archives section can probably do this from within its own ranks. You need a well-crafted proposal calling for a conference staff of four or five people who will conduct research, issue reports, publish a newsletter, hold conferences, and raise funds for special projects. Create a board of directors consisting of twenty corporations, each pledging a modest $30,000 a year for a three to five year period. *Voilà*, $600,000 annually to support research, communication, consultation, and visibility for business archives. It would go a long way toward addressing corporate issues associated with electronic records.

The Public Information Committee has proven its skills in the development of public support for archival concerns. Perhaps they would take on the challenge of creating the Documentary Heritage Foundation (DHF). The DHF should be a funding agency that identifies the most pressing records issues from a citizen's perspective. Protection of rights, public access, and educational programs focusing on the value of records to a democratic society might dominate this agenda. I envision a board of community leaders, public interest groups, information specialists, and lawyers. I see the foundation as periodically identifying two or three major issues and earmarking substantial funds, perhaps a million dollars annually, to projects that address these issues.

Religious archivists: your numbers are large and the institutions you serve are woven into the fabric of every society. You can garner the resources to support a Center for the Records of Belief. Ecumenical and archival in nature, the center would assist religious organizations to properly care for and value their records. It would also

allocate resources to the creation of standards for in-house archival programs (based heavily on SAA standards, to be sure), the identification of source material, and especially to the preservation needs of records that cover multiple media and thousands of years, including late-twentieth-century computer records.

I could go on, but you have the picture. We as individuals or as units within SAA can contribute in a major way to professional development. I have used specific examples in an effort to be concrete. Do not take them as other than suggestions. There is much to do and learn as we seek to expand our bases of support. Indeed, it will take many efforts to manage the creation of one new organization. The benefits, however, are well worthwhile. More infrastructure equals more resources, more personnel, more communication, and more visibility. It means more sources of expertise, more links to the larger society, more non-archivists engaged in our issues, more allies for SAA. It means that we meet the most difficult objective in our strategic plan, objective 3E, "to foster and support the development of mechanisms for research, advocacy, and increased funding to address, on an ongoing basis, issues arising from electronic records."

I do not want to leave this subject without paying tribute to three existing pillars—beyond SAA—of our progress to date. The National Historical Publications and Records Commission has consistently provided direction and support to program advancement, the Bentley Library Fellows Program has fostered much of our research and writing, and Archives and Museum Informatics has been an intellectual beacon whose light we follow through the technological darkness. Without these three core supports, our progress would be little indeed.

But I am in the business of infrastructure at the moment, and along with the development of wholly new organizations, I envision new roles for existing groups. So I imagine how much more would be possible if these three institutions functioned somewhat differently. An NHPRC without the constant, and in my opinion debilitating, battle for survival could place all its energies into monitoring and supporting a national agenda. I see a reconstituted NHPRC as the basis for a National Council on Archival Resources, a privately funded organization with representation from the major sectors of the profession and an unquestioned mandate to assert and support the profession's highest priorities.

The Bentley Library Fellows Program, which more than any other U.S. institution has fostered international archival exchange, could, with greater funding and expanded focus, help us reach across borders for solutions. The work of colleagues outside the United States is often rigorous, dynamic, and more advanced than our own. We need a visible, prestigious, and ongoing mechanism for the formal exchange of ideas and the international pursuit of common goals. Where better than with the Bentley Library might this mission be placed?

And finally, I imagine an Archives and Museum Informatics transformed into the archival equivalent of the Brookings Institution. The firm has international standing through conferences, workshops, publications, and consulting. But at the moment it is an incredibly productive one-man show. More musicians playing more instruments, reinterpreting old scores and writing new ones, would surely produce symphonic masterpieces. Where better to establish a flagship institution for research and analysis than with an expanded Archives and Museum Informatics?

As a profession we have made substantial progress in recent years. From archival programs to archival associations to archival standards to archival education, we have steadily strengthened the foundations of our field. It is time to take another step. We need more shops and services in the archival village, places that provide advo-

cacy, analysis, visibility, and resources. With more friends we have more staying power; we have the supports necessary to make progress, resolve problems, and pro-mote issues. But this will happen only if we try. The decision to try is yours and mine. Shall we begin?