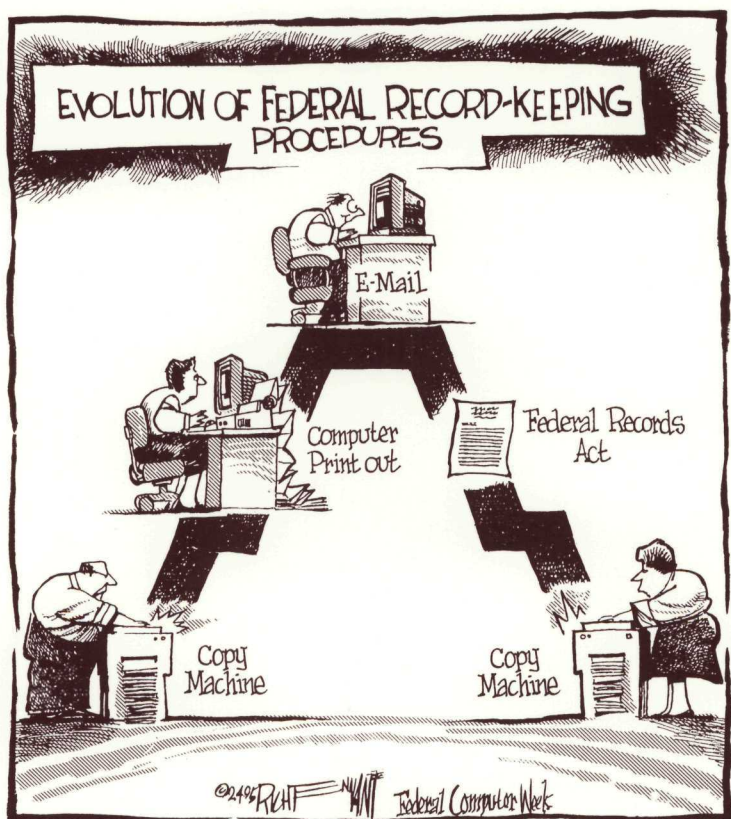


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The American Archivist

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About the cover: Issues about the management of electronic records continue to vex both archivists and records managers. This cartoon appeared in the September 4, 1995, issue of *Federal Computer Week* accompanying an editorial about the recent National Archives' electronic mail regulations and the apparent lack of e-mail management systems that would allow agencies not to have to print out electronic mail messages. This issue of the *American Archivist* carries several essays concerning the challenges of managing electronic mail. (Illustration courtesy of Richard Tennant)

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Forum

Appraisal and Oral Evidence

To the editor:

Luciana Duranti's otherwise excellent article, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," (*American Archivist*, 57 [Spring 1994]: 328-44) has in it a glaring error. Duranti believes "that documents purposely created to provide evidence of oral actions must not be included in the societal archives: They do not constitute evidence but interpretation, and their inclusion among archival material would be an infringement of our historical accountability" (p. 343).

To follow Duranti's direction to exclude all "documents purposely created to provide evidence of oral actions" would impoverish society, archives, and history by forcing archivists to throw out many critically important documents such as:

- all written minutes of meetings conducted orally.
- all written memoranda of oral conversation, statements, or interviews, even court stenographers' typed transcription of legal testimony during trials.
- all segments of written memoirs, biographies, or autobiographies that are based on "oral actions."
- all written diplomatic, legal, economic, social, and political reports or memoranda based solely on what one heard or said.

Instead of prolonging the list of types of items Duranti would remove from the historical record, let's remember specific documents from James Madison's notes on the

U.S. Constitutional Convention to John Dean's and J. R. Haldeman's memoranda of conversations with President Richard M. Nixon. Surely, most archivists would agree that to *not* include such "documents purposely created to provide evidence of oral actions . . . among archival material would be an infringement of our historical accountability."

ROBERT G. SHERER
University Archivist
Tulane University

Reply from the author:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to respond to the letter of Robert G. Sherer. Mr. Sherer is absolutely correct in each and every one of his statements. I would never suggest that any of the examples he lists is not the direct competence of the archivist and should be removed "from the historical record." I did not refer to those types of records when I made the statement quoted by Sherer. As a matter of fact, most of those records belong to one of the two most important diplomatic categories of records, the probative records. (See Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science. Part II," *Archivaria* 29 [Winter 1989-90]: 9.)

The key to my intended meaning is the adverb "purposely," as opposed to "naturally." Minutes, memoranda, and similar reports of oral actions are generated in the natural course of affairs, not to provide a historical record for future researchers. In other words, they are needed for carrying

out whatever activities the creator intends to carry out. On the contrary, oral histories, for example, are purposefully generated for posterity, and therefore do not present the necessary characteristics of all archival documents. The latter is the type of document I was referring to in my statement.

With all the above said, I wish to apologize to Robert Sherer and all my readers for my overconcise writing style. Too often I leave my readers to wonder what I mean by one sentence or another, and to interpret individual words, when one more sentence or a few examples would have made reading so much more pleasant! I will make a better effort in the future. I also wish to thank Robert Sherer for having brought the issue to my attention, and for giving me the opportunity to clarify my statement, as I am certain that many people have been wondering about it.

LUCIANA DURANTI
*Master of Archival Studies Program
University of British Columbia*

MicroMARC and Importing/ Exporting

To the editor:

In her article, "Automating the Archives: A Case Study," (*American Archivist* 57 [Spring 1994] 364–73) Carole Prietto misrepresents the capabilities and functions of MicroMARC:amc. From its initial release in 1986, MicroMARC:amc has always had the capability to import and export USMARC AMC records. This includes importing and exporting records to OCLC. There has never been a question with the ability of MicroMARC:amc to export records, whether to OCLC or other MARC systems. The only question has been in what medium. Until a few years ago, OCLC required the records be sent on a 9-

track tape. For MicroMARC:amc users who did not have the capability to generate a 9-track tape for export to OCLC, we provided such a service. Today MicroMARC:amc users can easily transport their USMARC AMC records to OCLC, RLIN, and so on, via the Internet.

FREDERICK L. HONHART
Michigan State University

Reply from the author

Thank you for the comment concerning my article. Please note that in footnote number 13, I do note the fact that at the time I evaluated MicroMARC for use at Washington University, "MicroMARC users had to copy completed records to a floppy disk and send them to Michigan State University. At Michigan State, records were tape-loaded into OCLC via the university's mainframe. Both MicroMARC and Minaret have since added modules for importing and exporting MARC records." The larger point being made at that place in the article was that, as of 1991, MARC records created in either Minaret and MicroMARC required some form of conversion routine before they could be loaded into OCLC. In both cases, that has since changed, as I also stated in footnote 13. I believe this addresses your points concerning OCLC conversion and MicroMARC, but if it does not, I would appreciate hearing from you so that the record may be set straight.

CAROLE PRIETTO
Washington University in St. Louis

With the exception of editing for conformity of capitalization, punctuation, and citation style, letters to the Forum are published verbatim.

From the Editor

Easy Distinctions

HISTORICAL PRESERVATIONIST Hugh Howard has written: "The world is full of easy distinctions. . . . a convenient one is between the savers and the throwers."¹ The essays in this issue of the *American Archivist* are also about easy distinctions in our own world: The champions of archives, versus those who are not advocates. The need to conduct research about basic archival functions versus the need to manage potential damage against providing greater detail on the costs of maintaining our documentary heritage. The growing use of electronic recordkeeping systems, moving against the tide of legal systems and archival practices still tied to a paper world. Education in the classroom, versus "street smarts" acquired over the information highway. Archives and records management objectives, weighed against organizations' interest in meeting them and supporting such objectives. The notion of our present professional practice, contrasted with the historical evolution of the field. Easy distinctions.

The initial essay on the early development of women's archives is a good place to begin considering some easy distinctions in our own work. Anke Voss-Hubbard's history of the origins of the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College is more than a

chronicle of the early formation of women's archives in this country. It is also an interesting exploration of the value and challenge of archival history. In previous essays I have argued for the relevancy of archival history, as have others (including James O'Toole, who does so again in his essay in this issue), so there is no need to repeat the arguments here. Voss-Hubbard's article, however, is an insightful view into the tenuous foundations of such subject archives, as well as our ability to go back and understand the origins of our programs. At several points, Voss-Hubbard comments on Mary Beard's own lack of interest in or care for her records. I suspect that many archivists have made little provision for their own papers, and that the future historians of our profession will face similar detective sleuthing. Does this strike anyone as peculiarly ironic, that the preservers of archival records are not administering their own archives?

For a long time archivists have operated as if arrangement and description were the primary functions of their work and responsibility. While appraisal and reference or use have at times competed for priority, other forces—the extent of writings, efforts to develop standards, and the emphases of graduate and continuing education—have kept arrangement and description at the fore. The easy distinction here is that arrangement and description equal archival knowledge and practice, whereas other activities are merely diversions from such

¹Hugh Howard, *The Preservationist's Progress: Architectural Adventures in Conserving Yesterday's Houses* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 5.

work. Yet, as Paul Ericksen and Robert Shuster convey in their essay, the supposed centrality of this function has not been accompanied by serious efforts to analyze its costs and procedures. With the details of their study, Ericksen and Shuster confirmed “that the resources we devoted to processing exceeded the value we placed on what we had accomplished.” Is there another irony here, in that this function’s importance as the primary user of archival resources has not been worthy of substantial study itself?²

For thirty years archivists and records managers have debated both the significance of electronic records and how to manage them. While this discussion has gone on, often generating more theoretical discourse rather than reflecting experience, our courts have slowly evolved to the point of treating electronic records as fundamentally different or distinct from paper records. Sara J. Piasecki’s essay on the legal admissibility of electronic records as evidence is a straightforward account of the evolution of law and legal decisions. While Piasecki sees many uncertainties in the direction our courts may be heading, leading to a certain “highly contentious legal future,” her reading of the law and legislation also identifies trends that force organizations, records managers, and archivists to develop more effective programs for ensuring the maintenance of electronic records systems. Although she does not write in this tone, it appears likely that the electronic technology sweeping through our organizations and society represents more opportunity for strengthening records and archival management if we po-

sition ourselves with the right advice in our institutions. The easy distinction between electronic and paper recordkeeping systems that has caused us to break our services and approaches so neatly between the two is nearing the end of its utility.

Archivists have also long debated the relevance of practice and theory and methodology gained in graduate classrooms. Some of these debates are cooling, as graduate education enters a new realm of sophistication and comprehensiveness. Yet, as the article by Diana Shenk and Jackie Esposito reveals, there remains a need and value in maintaining a strong and steady connection between training and education. Their discussion of the use of the ARCHIVES Listserv outlines the potential of bringing the practical, daily work of the archivist into the classroom, a value I certainly see as I require my archives students to read and discuss this and other listservs. Questions remain about the use of the electronic discussion vehicles. For example, Shenk and Esposito comment on the general lower quality of the resulting student papers; is this attributable to the listserv or is it more a reflection of what we should expect from a one-course introduction? In the program in which I teach, with a cluster of six courses, the quality of papers is high and the use of the Internet more sophisticated. Shenk and Esposito also point out that the use of the ARCHIVES Listserv provides “virtually unlimited access to the great archival minds in our profession.” However, many leading archivists do not participate in the public discussions, at the same time that anyone (including nonarchivists) can join and participate in the discussions. (How are these sorted out?) And we must still ask if the best access to the best thinking about archival science is not in the print (or electronic) journals rather than in listservs.

A gap in reality between aim and practice is also often a problem for the purpose of organizational and governmental records

²This topic is by no means alone in this regard. Every few months the ARCHIVES Listserv features a lengthy essay about user fees. I remember that many of the more recent comments were uttered at professional conferences I attended twenty years ago. Yet, we do not have a single study, even a profile, of the prevailing use of fees in archival programs!

management and archives programs. The contribution in this issue by Peter Waters and Henk Nagelhout about recent efforts by the National Archives of The Netherlands offers ways to deal with these challenges. Rather than trying to force procedures and policies that cut across the organizational grain, archivists and records managers are striving to determine and then meet the needs and wishes of the agency staff creating and maintaining the records. These European archivists also confirm the need, long accepted but seldom practiced, for identifying at an early stage of creation those records that are archival. Their approach also suggests what is happening with our late twentieth-century institutions, when they discuss the abandonment of uniform approaches in favor of a greater diversity for records management.

James O'Toole's review essay on the history of literacy is an important contribution to our professional literature because it shows, with no doubt, that there is a rich and vital scholarship with direct relevance to our own discipline. As he states, those who think they know all they need to know about our professional past from a quick reading of Posner and a few others are very sadly mistaken. Perhaps an easy distinction here is the irony that a profession concerned with preserving historical records seems blissfully unaware both of its own past and of the need to preserve the records of its own institutions, leaders,

and profession. If it has no other impact, O'Tooles's essay ought to convey the message that the burdens and challenges of the modern electronic age may not be far removed from our ancient predecessors' challenge of coping with the transition from orality to writing and from manuscript to printed texts.

Although Edie Hedlin's essay on building foundations appears first in this issue, as the Presidential Address, it is an appropriate thought for concluding this introductory editorial. My focus has been on easy distinctions, but Edie's emphasis is on hard ones. She argues—and does it well, in my opinion—for the need to build partnerships and professional infrastructure. She describes, well again, how the problems we face are big and require coordinated actions and new initiatives. The issues and concerns raised by the other authors in this *American Archivist* are exactly the kinds that could be tackled by the types of consortia, institutes, centers, and think-tanks Edie describes in her stirring call for new actions. It is the role of our presidents to paint the big picture and to point us toward brave new worlds. Generally, we forget what they have said or (and just as bad) we view their messages as historical documents reflecting where we were at a particular juncture. Edie Hedlin has given us a document that should not be shelved and forgotten. If we fail to heed this advice, society may shelve us and forget what we have to say.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to James O'Toole, the author of the review essay mentioned in the text.