

## Commentary on *Archival Strategies*

# The Archival Image

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**Abstract:** In the seventeenth century, Dutch administrators considered their books and records important evidence of their regard for the proper conduct of their duties. As David Bearman proposed in *Archival Methods*, and now in *Archival Strategies*, archivists should focus on ensuring that proof of accountability in the present is sufficiently prepared and preserved. In addition, archives' dual roles of preserving the past and documenting the present could be advanced further by emphasizing the visibility, clarity of purpose, and accessibility of archives. Bearman's *Archival Strategies* can provide a tool for the reinvention of the archival image.

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IN 1617 AND 1618, Cornelis van der Voort painted three group portraits of Amsterdam *regenten*: the regents of Saint Peter's Hospital, their colleagues of the old people's home, and the regents of the Tuchthuis, the workhouse. These three paintings were the beginning of a new tradition in portraying officials in the Republic of the United Provinces. The portraits depicted a new image of professionalism, by showing the regents engaged in the administration of their institution. The regents expressly asked to be portrayed with their records - accounting books, ledgers, letters, maps. The paintings "emphasize, through the attention on business skills, a general administrative proficiency as the distinctive ability of the professional regent," as Sheila Muller has commented on Van der Voort's portraits. But there is more. The regents had to manage the institution, but they also administered the properties, both those donated to the institution and those possessed by the inmates of the hospital, workhouse, or old people's home. To account for their administration, the regents had to ensure that evidence was created and kept. Many archives of these institutions have been preserved. They indeed include the books and registers which were portrayed with their creators. These items were seen not only as symbols of the regents' professionalism, but also as icons of their concern for accountability, for creating evidence, and for forming the institution's corporate memory.

These last three points I consider to be facets of one and the same stone, rather than three distinct purposes, as David Bearman suggests in section III of *Archival Strategies*.

In an American business magazine (*Inc.*), I read about the project-management of Bay Cast, a foundry in Bay City, Michigan. Several castings are combined and poured in one heat at a time. The manager explained, "We make an archival test bar of steel from each process and catalog it by

heat number, and we save it for seven years in case problems arise." That manager would agree, as I do, with Bearman, "that archives are not old records, but vital evidence" (*Archival Strategies*, section VI.a). Archives and records (in Dutch archival terminology, like elsewhere in Europe, we have a single term for records and archives!) are, indeed, important in terms of everyday, real economic needs. And by ensuring today's evidence, archivists, as Bearman argued in *Archival Methods*, connect "the present with the recent past, not by passively conserving the evidence of a distant past for the unmeasurable benefit of some equally remote future." Present, future, past: archivists should redirect their action from preserving the past to documenting the present, in order to have a corporate memory in the future. "Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future" (T.S. Eliot).

Records on seventeenth century Dutch paintings created the image of accountability, evidence, corporate memory. What is the image conveyed by modern media? Richard Cox researched the coverage of archives and archivists by the *New York Times*. A student of mine at Leyden University and I are doing the same with two of the leading national newspapers in the Netherlands. In one paper, *NRC-Handelsblad*, archives were featured 104 times from February through July 1994. Sometimes archives were used as a metaphor only, as in the article by the Paris correspondent who cannot get fresh milk and has therefore to buy milk which can be kept for several months—he calls that "archival milk." Archives were featured in 27 percent of the articles in their cultural, historical, and informational function. But even more frequently (28 percent of the articles), archives were treated not as historical sources, but as actual evidence in political and criminal cases, as primary sources of accountability in public and private organizations. This shows

that the image of archives is formed equally by their function in understanding the past, and by their function in achieving accountability. We should use these twin functions in developing new strategies in public relations.

Accountability's sisters are visibility, transparency, and access. **Visibility:** can anyone see from the outside that the building is housing an archives service? Are the archives visible in the press, on TV? Can one find the archives on the city map posted outside the railway station or in the telephone directory? **Transparency:** do we make it clear to our funding authorities and to our other stakeholders - the public at large - what our goals and priorities are, what we do to achieve these, what contributions we expect from outside? When was the last time you asked a user what he or she really wants from your archives or what service your archives should improve? **Access:** since, 200 years ago, the French Revolution proclaimed the right of citizens to have access to public archives, this has been the ultimate goal of any archival policy. Ensuring free and equal access, as a prerequisite of accountability, is

a much more important archival goal than the insipid "enable use" of David Bearman (*Archival Strategies*, section III.e).

Without access and use, no archives can survive. Reinventing archives therefore means redefining the relationship between archival institutions and the citizen—archives "of the people, by the people, and for the people." The success of an archival program, of the archival profession, depends on the extent to which we can make our archives (paper archives, electronic archives, and virtual archives alike) into people's archives.

I am convinced that in this reinventing process we need to use Bearman's *Archival Strategies*, not as a code of precepts, but as a conceptual tool, which any archivist should utilize creatively to shape the "vision that provides meaning and direction to their institution and inspires the staff and creates a sense of purpose, focus, and commitment." Let the profession continue to be provoked and inspired by David Bearman. Only when we respond to the challenge to develop new strategies and methods, can we be assured that we "shall not perish from the earth."