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Guest Editorial: Archives to Archives and Dust to Dust

David B. Gracy II

University of Texas at Austin

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Archives to Archives and Dust to Dust

It's everywhere, dust is. We came from it, to it we return, and in the meantime we fight a constant battle to keep it off of objects we hold dear. Nevertheless, there is one place in all the world where, more than any other, a person expects to find dust: in an archives. People who know nothing about archives—who clearly are blank on the purpose, nature, work and service of archives in the preservation of the permanently valuable documentation of civilization—know there's dust there. There is no more pervasive cliché of our time than that papers consigned to archives moulder into it.

News writers, an accurate gauge of public knowledge, confirm the fact. "Archives Dusts Off Its Image With Souvenirs from WWII to Watergate" a headline writer for the Chicago Tribune titled the 24 February 1985 feature on the exhibit at, and in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of, the National Archives. Responding to President Reagan's news conference with Soviet journalists late last year, the Soviet newspaper Izvestia attacked what it termed the president's arbitrary use of facts, stating that "The President makes propaganda for American proposals, covered with archive dust...."

Are archives dusty, dark, dismal, dank, damp, desolate (oh, the alliteration begs for more dingy d words!) places? The question must be asked because people who should know better, don't do better. Take Dr. Ennis Reinhartz of the University of Texas at Arlington. He told a reporter that
"Historians don't all sit in dark, dusty archives, but that's where we're the happiest." The stereotype could be no more firmly rooted and no more hogwash than this. Anyone can see it simply by looking at the pictures accompanying the article. Reinhartz posed in an immaculately neat, clean, and well-lit room. There is not a speck of dust anywhere.  

Ask yourself, if all you had ever heard about archives was dust, dust, dust, would you want to go there? Would you be inclined to put much of your hard-earned money into them? Would you want to be seen openly with people who look forward to spending their working lives there? It is remarkable, isn't it, that the repetition of one little word can stereotype--indeed, has marked for the definite worse--an entire occupation and profession. 

The bald fact is that if archives are dusty, and by inference ill-kept, uninviting, low-priority places, they are so simply because archivists lack the staff and resources to make their repositories otherwise. It is not because we are ignorant of what to do and how to do it. The situation is, therefore, an indictment of the very public, press, historians and organization decision makers who stereotype archives as worthy of only a low priority on the budget ladder. The maxim "You get what you pay for" applies here. 

The blame for the unsatisfactory shape the archival holdings of this nation are in is ours, too, however. When was the last time you objected out loud to the dusty stereotype, took the occasion to inform the hearer of the benefits the person received by virtue of the existence of archives, and invited the person to visit your repository? We archivists have been too quiet, have not made the public, the press, and our budget decision makers aware that the condition of the nation's documentary heritage over which they have control both reflects on and ill serves them. But be positive about it. Recall the advice of the sage who said: "The best way to get on in the world is to make people believe it's to their advantage to help you." In other words, when we do
something about our unsatisfactory situation and the
low priority it locks us into, something will be
done, and the status quo will not continue ad
infinitum.

This positive thought--that we can and must do
something--is the inspiration behind the "Archives
and Society" campaign of the Society of American
Archivists (SAA), nay, of the archival profession.
Recognizing that the archival profession in North
America is held in low esteem by our society and that
that low esteem translates into resources inadequate
to fund the vital work we are charged to do, the SAA
two years ago embarked on a program to begin
reversing that low esteem. The SAA established a
Task Force on Archives and Society and charged it to
accomplish four goals: 1) to produce a statement,
that we all can use, on the importance of archives to
and in society (That statement, printed as a flier
and available now for mass distribution, asks the
engaging question: "Who is The 'I' in Archives?" and
answers it with a resounding "YOU!"); 2) to propose
ways and means that we--as individuals, as
professionals in our associations, and as employees
of our institutions--can use to raise public
awareness, appreciation, understanding, and support
of archival work; 3) to suggest action the SAA could
take; and 4) to serve as a clearinghouse for ideas
and information.

The task force began work on the second and third
charge by inviting comment from archivists on the
scope of the problem as they saw it and on actions
they thought ought to be taken. We received so many,
and such philosophically disparate suggestions that
we concluded that the most responsible first step
would be to conduct a study of the perceptions,
opinions, and rationales for decision and action of
the most important single group to us, those persons
one, two, and three rungs above us on the
organizational ladder who control the resources
allotted us to accomplish our work--"resource
allocators" as we called them. SAA Council agreed,
and contracted for the study with Professor Sidney J.
Levy, chair of the marketing department of the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University and president of Social Research, Inc., to conduct the study.

Sid presented and discussed his findings at the SAA annual meeting last October (1985). What he had to say was instructive and revealing about how we are perceived, and his findings offer solid ground for framing our course of action to combat our unsatisfactory image and thereby to improve the support of archival enterprise.

Resource allocators, Sid found, understand the purpose and value the services of archives. Contrary to our belief that ignorance of archives lies at the root of our image problem, resource allocators showed a reasonable-to-good knowledge of the contents, functions, and usefulness of the holdings of the archives for which they are responsible. Admitting that they knew nothing about archives when they took charge, resource allocators expressed surprise, delight, and relief upon finding no dust or gloom when they first set foot in the archives. They lavished praise on both the staff and the operation, particularly on the quality of service delivered within the difficult confines, which they recognized, of inadequate funding, staff, and space. With a new image of, and pride in, their archives, resource allocators spoke of the archives growing, not diminishing, in interest, importance, size, and quality. At least that is what they said to the interviewer, whom they knew was sponsored by the professional association to which their archivists belong.

When applying this euphoria in concrete situations, specifically budget allocation, resource allocators retreated, became cautious, talked about fairness, and used terms such as "balance" and "reasonable." Archives have and, if nothing is done, will have a low priority for several reasons, Levy learned.

a. They are out of sight and out of mind.
b. They hark to the past, seem passive and
stored, compared to more current, ongoing, aggressive demands on the budget of the organization.

c. They lack, and make no serious effort to have, political clout, compared to other departments.

d. In businesses, they are not profit centers.

To receive a larger chunk of the budget, all resource allocators said plainly, archives would have to present some program or problem meriting the greater allocation. Improving the job being done is not justification sufficient to merit changing present agency budget priorities. That hurts. We archivists have operated on the philosophy that if we did a better job--handled more patrons or processed greater quantities of records--additional resources adequate at least to maintain our level of operation would in time be forthcoming.

More disturbing yet, Sid found that resource allocators believe they know enough about archives to know that archives are getting what they are worth.

The way they see archivists reinforces their opinion. Resource allocators perceive (and respect) us as skilled people driven by a strong motivation to save and serve. The traits they equate with archivists are: appreciation of history; a detective-like curiosity; patience with details; a strong sense of organization; ability to work in solitude and confinement; desire and ability to serve various user groups; and skill with preservation and repair.

Archivists are these things. But recognize that these are curatorial traits. Fine in themselves, they do not include the traits most prized by resource allocators: entrepreneurship, political savvy, skills in management and decision making, innovativeness, commitment to supporting and improving the organization. Moreover, the curatorial traits are, some resource allocators said, more important to them than the professional competence of the individual archivist. Individual certification "might qualify the archivist to do a better job," remarked one, "but there are other qualities that we are looking for."
Since resource allocators view us in this light, can anyone be surprised to learn that pleasure in archival work is thought--indeed, preferred by resource allocators--to be the archivists' greatest reward. Archivists are perceived to be pleased, and to be satisfied to be pleased, by the intellectual challenge of the work, the joy of discovery, the gratification in being of service, and by the fact that the work of "preserving forever" is touched with immortality. "They are rewarded when information from their holdings gets published," said one resource allocator. "The fact that a book comes out and they have helped the author to get the research done and they may see that they get their name printed as having helped the author. It's like they are deserving of a medal."

Is that what we want and what we are worth: a medal? The study says to me in no uncertain terms that we have work to do. Archivists have an identity that is a compound of specific abilities and attractions, somewhat vaguely conceptualized in the minds of nonarchivists and burdened by unexciting stereotypical elements--like dust. To improve our situation, Professor Levy suggests, we need to define a more coherent identity and objectives, and to communicate greater freshness and distinctiveness. Making archives appear more accessible and doing more to open them to use and visiting should diminish the various wrong concepts of dustiness and mustiness, sheer acquisitiveness, territoriality, and dead accumulation wrongly associated with us and our work. Holding and advertising open houses, showcases, special events, celebrations, announcements of findings and distinctive uses of archives, more, and more appropriate, educational programs, Sid explains, will convey a greater sense of vitality.

Simultaneously, we need, Sid observes, to jar the resource allocators' satisfaction so that they re-perceive archivists as deserving of greater support. Archives must be shown to be relevant to modern life. To achieve this understanding, Levy counsels us to emphasize the essential character of
archives and to stress the critical needs we fill in our organizations. The purposes, uses, and contributions of archives have to be made more vivid, more explicit, more concrete, and be repeated in varied ways. Doing this requires the communication of a steady flow of examples to heighten awareness and appreciation of what the organization and the resource allocators are getting for their money.

Levy continues quickly that self assertion does not mean that archivists have to become belligerent, unpleasant, and obstinant. In the appreciation resource allocators have of the importance of the work we do and the respect they grant for our curatorial strengths, we have a foundation on which to begin seeking participation in decisions about us. In particular Sid proposes that we be less sympathetic to the resource allocator's budget problems. We are doing too good a job, he suggests, because we continue doing as much, if not more, with less. Were you in the resource allocator's shoes, would you give critical resources where they do not appear to be needed? It is time we perceived the politics of budget competition for the give-and-take game that it is and participate in it for the benefit of our holdings and thereby of our organization as a whole. The greatest obstacle to overcome in changing our approach to budget matters likely will be the resource allocators' perception of themselves being on the side of archivists and regret at not being able to do more for us. But this, too, can be a strength when we can make them see how a stronger archives enhances their position.

Some resource allocators will hear us speaking directly to them from within our organization, some will not. To reach these latter, we must pool our energies.

First, accepting the fact that changing the perception of resource allocators in particular and the public in general is a long-time project, we need to organize ourselves to maintain the focus on Archives and Society. Several regional archival associations have established Archives and Society
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preserve the documentary heritage of our particular part of the world. By our dynamism, energy, activity, and progress, the misshapen, inaccurate image of archives and archivists as dusty places and people, nice but not really important, will fall away and never be talked of again. "Archives to archives and dust to dust." This is a cry of a new image and an invigorated dimension of service of archives to both our institutions and society at large. It is a cry not of an end, but of a beginning.

David B. Gracy II

David B. Gracy II is the Governor Bill Daniel Professor of Archival Enterprise, University of Texas at Austin. He was director of the Texas State Archives when he presented the original version of this editorial at the fall workshop of the Society of Georgia Archivists, 21 November 1985, Atlanta, Georgia. As president of the Society of American Archivists (1984), Gracy promoted the Archives and Society campaign. He is a former president of the Society of Georgia Archivists and was the first editor of Georgia Archive, now Provenance.

NOTES


2 Barbara Burke, "Professor Assists Government in War Criminal Deportation Case," The Magazine of the University of Texas at Arlington 6 (July 1984): 5.