

5-2017

Defining Archives: Ingenuity, Innovation and New Perspectives

Dr. Meredith Evans

Jimmy Carter Library and Museum

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Evans, Dr. Meredith, "Defining Archives: Ingenuity, Innovation and New Perspectives," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 34 no. 2 (2017) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol34/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Defining Archives: Ingenuity, Innovation and New Perspectives

Dr. Meredith Evans

First, let me get some formalities out of the way: as a federal employee now, it has been made very clear to me that I need to let you all know the views I am sharing are mine and do not necessarily represent the views of the federal government or NARA/ the Presidential Libraries, and that I am participating in a personal capacity as a scholar and archivist.

I am honored to be with you all this morning. It has been ten years since I have worked and lived in Georgia, and it's good to be back. Although this is not how I envisioned visiting the coast again, it is good nonetheless. My heart and support goes out to the families and businesses that have been affected by Hurricane Matthew from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and here in Georgia.

Let me begin by sharing a few things about myself. I am an extrovert; an ESFJ to be exact. That's Myers-Briggs speak for "extroverted; sensing; feeling; judging." Extrovert meaning I feed off people's energy and talk a lot. Sensing meaning I absorb a lot of information quickly. Feeling meaning I make decisions on a case by case basis. Judging meaning I am neat and orderly, borderline OCD—well, I have a few compulsive reactions to things. But all in all I tend to be a different kind of breed in this profession. I often get asked if I consider myself a librarian or an archivist. My reply is that I am a steward of cultural institutions and history. I am an archivist and librarian by way of formal education and have worked as both as well as served as a manager for over 20 years. I have worked at historical societies, community colleges, historically black colleges and universities, research libraries and almost- research libraries, and now a federal repository. I like to manage people and build collections that will correct the wrongs of history and that will breathe new life into scholarship and the community. I have taught and mentored and am still learning. My current research is about ethical issues and technical challenges related to documenting social media such as Twitter. But more on that later.

Enough about me. Today we are kicking off another fabulous learning opportunity. This conference is “Defining Archives: Ingenuity, Innovation, and New Perspectives.” What a glorious time to be in the archival profession, and a somewhat scary time. The sessions at this conference explore the many interesting ways we do our work and I am excited. For the last few years I have been critical of the profession. How we are restricted and confined by the politics, cultures, and funding—or lack of funding—at our institutions. How companies are advancing in technologies and offering services that make it appear that they are doing our jobs better than we are. I contend that we still have a vital role—one that cannot be ignored regardless of technological advancements, the size of the institution, collection, or staff. We are the experts.

I would like to share four concepts and examples of how I have implemented them over time in my career. I have been asking people to consider different ways of incorporating and balancing these principles or ideas tangibly into their work: collecting, connecting, collaborating, and community.

- Collecting content from the past and the present and preparing for the future.
- Connecting with people through events, exhibits, and use of technology.
- Collaborating with immediate constituents and external entities such as other cultural institutions.
- Engaging the community that owns, supports or serves the repository and creating a new community that will advocate for you and donate to the repository

These sound simple and as if we do them every day. But I am often surprised by how we do things the same way for decades, or we squabble among ourselves when a new idea seems unattainable. Now I am not saying I have all the answers nor am I saying this will always work—there is no one way to conduct our business, but hopefully this will spark some ideas and encourage you. And I believe our goal is the same: to preserve and diversify the records used to write history.

Here are examples of my past work from print to digital to emphasize these ideas.

Collecting

At a previous institution there was very little active collecting due to space, monetary, and resource concerns, etc. To address these challenges, the special collections department began to host monthly alumni affinity groups. Space was free and only required one staff person to stay a few extra hours. The department provided food (in the hallway), space, and showed the alumni yearbooks and other gems from the collection. Our presence and introduction to materials became an education for those close to the university and soon became something of value and importance to them. The relationship with this group resulted in a donation of a \$10,000 print collection, an increase in usage, review of collection policies, and a desire to actively acquire new collections.

- The partner: alumni relations.
- The result: new fan base, cash gift, receipt of collection material, increased awareness and usage.

Connecting

To connect with the university and surrounding community, the special collections department created a Historic Walking Tour using QR codes, History Pin, and photographs from the collections. This project involved working with a variety of university departments such as Facilities, Communications, and Admissions. A seemingly simple project exposed staff to how decisions at the university are made. We needed permission to put QR codes on outside signage. We needed facilities staff to help select the right material from which to fabricate the QR codes and attach them to signage. Special collections appreciated the marketing help and our contribution to improved tours given for new student prospects. This project also brought awareness of our work and the collections to colleagues outside of the library who barely knew we existed. Going outside of the library to collaborate helped gain new allies to expand and support the mission of the Special Collections Research Center, which included University Archives. This walking tour is accessible to everyone in the city and was noted by the Cultural Tourism Board,

giving the neighborhood, not just the university, a renewed sense of pride.

- The partner: non-library university departments.
- The result: use of technology, publically available access to collections, marketing to a larger and non-traditional audience, participation on university-wide committees

Collaborating

Working with the assistant director for sexual and gender diversity at another university, the special collections department began assisting in the collecting of materials that document the LGBTQ community in the area. The uniqueness of this project pushed the boundaries of archival theory and practice. My non-archivist colleague was vested in the community and had all the relationships and trust. So he actively acquired collections and I accepted them without an initial review and appraisal assessment. The goal was to expand local collecting efforts. The repository already held content on local civil rights and neighborhood information, but it wasn't reflective of the entire community. We also wanted to improve community relations, move away from the "town and gown" perception, and offer a safe place for discourse and peace of mind to those who donated materials that held significant emotional value to them. In addition, we wanted to bring awareness, understanding, and even reconciliation within the larger community. With core initial collections this project was launched with an exhibit at a revered museum in the city, curated by the assistant director and special collections staff. It is worth mentioning that this project is no longer a project—it is now an ongoing collecting area supported by the university and library.

- The partner: non-academic department and staff; renowned, non-university public museum.
- The result: new donor base, new audience, marketing to a larger and non-traditional audience, diversification of the larger collection, increase in social responsibility.

Community

This example is a collaborative, community-driven digital repository project called Documenting Ferguson. It was meant to preserve both local and national history surrounding the police killing of a teenager in Ferguson, Missouri. The project team included staff from the Washington University in St. Louis libraries, faculty from the Center for the Humanities, and staff from the Center for Diversity and Inclusion. Powered by Omeka, an open source web-publishing platform, the repository allows individuals to contribute photographs, digital audio and video material, and documents from computers and mobile devices. To simplify the submission process, the team established a set of technical criteria and copyright information—not editorial oversight. The uniqueness of this project is its attempt to document the events and responses regarding this situation (mainly protests) as it occurred. This repository is uncensored, “uncurated” web-based material that will be permanently stored and accessible to the public. The submissions are also semi-anonymous—only an email address is required and recorded. The contributor can decide whether to add more description or not. This sets it apart from other projects and what is provided by media outlets—it also pushes the boundaries of archival principles and will require some adjustments later so that it is more useful.

- The partner: the community, everyday folk.
- The result: diversification of the larger collection, new perception of the university among the community, new audience, new donors, increase in social responsibility.

All four of these concepts have pros and cons and require strategy, a push out of our comfort zone and new ideas—small tweaks in how we work towards changes. Our work goes beyond processing and exposing existing collections. We have to create relationships to continue the development of collections and try new things to see what works best. We cannot remain static in our policies and procedures; they must be reviewed and revised every few years to keep up with our missions and societal needs.

Traditionally, we as archivists have used documents to create a more diverse version of the past. However, this is often through the

lenses of our current identities, rather than uncovering untold or ignored histories. This approach to our work is why relationship building, community engagement, and broader interpretation of our standards are especially important. Currently, we are in a time when we manage multiple formats and have to figure out ways to organize and preserve anything and everything for long-term preservation and accessibility. Fiscally, only partnerships and fundraising will help us sustain this model. Consider different ways—must we own everything we collect? With technology, can't we share resources?

Documenting the Now

Lastly, I would like to discuss my current research and involvement with a project called Documenting the Now (DocNow). The DocNow is a grant-funded project and partnership with Washington University in St Louis (WUSTL), the University of California at Riverside (UCR), and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH). It is intended to accomplish two goals. The first is to develop an open source web application that will allow researchers and archivists to easily collect, analyze, and preserve Twitter messages, attachments or the web resources they reference. The second is to cultivate a conversation between scholars, archivists, journalists, and civil and human rights activists around the effective and ethical use of social media content. One of the highest priorities for the DocNow project is to address the ethical issues around the collection, preservation, and sharing of social media content. While some of these issues can be handled by functionality built into the tool, others will have to be addressed through recommended practices developed during the project. The ethical considerations around social media archives are riddled with technical, theoretical, and practical complications, and the best way to tackle them is to address them head on. Our profession must develop or at least be part of the development of guidelines, best practices, and/or a set of values to confront these concerns and protect the creators and users of content that can upset the status quo.

Archivists have developed tools for protecting ourselves, our institutions, and donors of personal papers, but not necessarily the creator and user. In the past we could restrict data, postpone its availability. However, in the digital age we don't necessarily do this. The days of going to attics or basements to collect materials from

decades ago are limited. Can or should we offer to owners of social media archives the same level of protections and recognition of privilege the deed of gift gives to traditional donors? No one expects their phone calls to be recorded and kept when they are in public, so why is it okay to collect, store, and use tweets in your article or research? Is it fair or ethical to assume that the creator of the tweet understood the implications of publically tweeting and that their tweets can be stored and used against them for years to come? Acknowledging that preserving tweets and other forms of social media can violate the original intent of the user and change the context of their posts based on how we make the collections available is a big step. The DocNow project debates whether archivists should continue to treat social media archives like they have no owners. Even Twitter acknowledges that users retain the rights to content in their tweets, the tactic we used with Documenting Ferguson.

As the DocNow team continues to work through the ethics of collecting, preserving, and sharing social media archives, the team comes closer to framing some recommended practices for future users. Examples of these results may include standards for how archivists transfer some of the protections afforded by the deed of gift to this new type of digital record and procedures for providing the creator and potential donor an opportunity to make decisions about how their legacy might be consumed by the public.

Conclusion

After all these examples and encouragement to take risks and interpret and execute archival concepts more loosely, some of you may be wondering: who is this chick up here talking, doesn't she know how hard it is do any of these things? Yes I do. I have done them. I have tried and failed at some things. It takes time, perseverance, and determination, but it can be done with or without support from your management or leadership team. Look around you—someone in here will help. Whether you do it on a small scale or a large scale, find colleagues and partners who will encourage you and assist. It will be lonely at times, but we don't have many options in our profession if we want to remain the unbiased experts and the go-to group for the collecting of material that informs written history and the social memory of our society. Companies will do it for us

and try to make us buy it back. Donors are paying them to do what we do faster than us. Yet I stand before you to say join me! Be at the table with me. Let's tackle our existing print collections, continue to collect in all formats, and stay on top of the records that tell the story for the next generation.

Focusing on the principles of history and memory and social responsibility makes our repositories better and our work more rewarding. Keeping an open mind in order to preserve the history of one's society is worth the experimentation and exploration out of one's comfort zone. Think forward. Manage forward. Let's lead!

Dr. Meredith Evans is the director of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museums, administered by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). She is the first African American woman to direct a presidential library. Formerly an Associate University Librarian at Washington University in St. Louis and UNC Charlotte, she deeply believes in supporting community collaborations to increase the number of collections that serve as evidence for written history. Evans has written on the role and value of libraries and archives as advocacy organizations that support and document social change. Her leadership goes beyond managing special collections and traditional print material. She has been active in the formation and integration of digitization and digital scholarship at different institutions and in community engagement. Evans earned a master's degree in library science from Clark Atlanta University, a master's degree in public history from North Carolina State University, and a doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.