

An Archivist's Role in Defining History

by Melissa Mannon

However much we might like to label ourselves as "unbiased," every person has opinions. We are shaped by our upbringing, by our surroundings and by an innate outlook on life. As keepers of records, our biases help shape our collections. The stories we keep within our records are the ones that we deem valuable or the ones that come to our attention because they are about a popular topic or well-known person. The very act of choosing to collect certain documents can influence how history is told and how events are remembered. Archivists are the "mediators" between historical events and those who wish to learn more about them through the records in our keeping.

We attach value to certain subjects by deciding to collect

related records, by deciding which ones to process first, and by publicizing those holdings we deem most important. Sometimes record caretakers very consciously ignore certain materials and keep them out of the archives or do not attach enough importance to something in a collection to process it. An archivist has the power to help define history and to help designate which parts of it are important and which are not. It is imperative for everyone who makes collection development decisions for historical records to recognize this power and to take it very seriously.

Many of the documents we have lost to time had as much to say about our past as the archives that reside safely in our collec-

tions today. How much of history is lost to neglect? How would perspectives differ on various topics if we had additional resources that may offer conflicting points of view? How can we as archivists work to save as many viewpoints as possible? How should we re-evaluate our role as record keeper to help ensure that a more complete historical record is preserved?

Many of our decisions may be prompted by influential bosses, donors, politicians, and supporters. What they deem important may become important to archivists with the hope of garnering favor or support for their role within the institution. Should we as record keepers actively work against these interests in favor of an uncensored presentation of culture? I think it is appropriate to see our role as protectors of truth,

THREE WAYS TO MAKE OBJECTIVE COLLECTIONS

- Create a timeline of events in your community. Try to list all subjects associated with those events.. Think of all the aspects of this era that you can focus on in your archives. List both good and bad events, people, and other related topics.
- Evaluate your holdings through an archival survey. Do your records cover the subjects you listed in your timeline from all different points of view and angles? Make sure your collection development policy reflects those diverse views of events and make sure it contains a statement about your desire to create an objective collection.
- Create procedures for the handling of collections including when various collections should be processed. This will ensure that collections are handled fairly and more than just "popular" subjects are indexed and available to researchers.

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preserving legitimate sources and helping others discover and use them to form their own opinions about history.

It is impossible to collect everything, but as collectors we must do our best to present a mix of opinions and diverse points of view regardless of the partial influences that swirl around us. Your archives should have information about the common man as well as the city mayor. It should present both the good and bad about your community.

In my personal life, I have very concrete views and values. I try to be open-minded, but in honesty, most of my beliefs cloud my

decisions. I vote for the people whose views most closely match mine. I send my daughter to the schools that use the teaching methods I think are best. I live in a way that is in harmony with my vision of the world. I recognize that other people have other points of view and, if desirable, I can usually shrug them off and return to living my life the way that I want to live it. This is not the way that I want to conduct my professional life. As an archivist, I have a responsibility to make all points of view known. I have a responsibility to make sure multiple viewpoints are reflected in whatever collection I handle.

Sometimes our role as definers of history gets lost in the day-to-day

details. We process records, create databases of information, and assist researchers. Beyond our tasks, we need to keep in mind the bigger picture of what we do as culture keepers — definers of history. We must recognize that what we collect or do not collect can have a very powerful affect on society. What we process can similarly influence our communities. The way our era will be viewed by future historians lies in large part on our backs. Eventually, historians will peel past the rhetoric and passionate secondary source material and come into the archives to define what our generation really accomplished. It is not our role to censor what they might find.



Archives and Information Consultant Melissa Mannon is owner of ArchivesInfo.

Please send questions and comments to melissa@mannon.org.

For more information about her work and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

RECOMMENDED READING

The Power of Archives: Archivists Values and Value in the Post Modern Age.

<http://www.archivists.org/governance/presidential/GreeneAddressAug08.pdf>

Francis X. Blouin, Jr., William G. Rosenberg. *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, Umich. Press, 2007.

Carol Kammen. *On Doing Local History*. Altamira Press, 2003. Written by a local historian, has much insightful information about how historians view the role of the archivist.

Richard Cox. *Ethics, Accountability and Recordkeeping in a Dangerous World*. Facet Publishing, 2006. Dr. Cox writes extensively about archivists and censorship.

Richard Cox. "Archival Ethics: The Truth of the Matter." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science & Technology*; May2008, Vol. 59 Issue 7, p1128-1133, 6p