University Archives: from passive preserving to active participation in the historical process

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Introduction

Not even archivists can escape the cartoonist's pen. In several of his *Shoe* comic strips Jeff MacNelly compares archives with the messy desk of an absent-minded "Prefesser" and even to a garbage dump, only without the flock of scavenging seagulls. (Grabowski, 1992: 466)

Sadly, despite their light-hearted approach, cartoon strips depict the reality. For most people archives are places locked in time, where ancient things are buried under a cloud of dust, only to be used by an elite group of serious scholars who are willing to dig through piles of documents, hoping to find some long-forgotten event in history, which, even though interesting, has no relevance to present circumstances. (Ericson, 1990-1991: 114; Grabowski, 1992: 466; Nesmith, 2002: 33; Wilson, 1990-1991: 97)

Archivists are also not considered as the most dynamic contributors and participants in the ever-changing fast-paced world. According to Sir Hilary Jenkinson, archivist of the United Kingdom Public Record Office in the first half of the 20th century, archival work is most effective when it is done unobtrusively. He viewed archiving as a mechanical process, where the role of the archivists was merely as recipients and keepers of objective records. (Greene, 2002: 51-52) This image of archivists is still prevalent today. Archivists are seen as background figures, passively trying to mirror the world around the archives by listing, describing and preserving the records, with active intervention being limited to the preparation of finding aids and assisting historians in their research. This has lead to a commonly accepted perception that archivists are, despite their efficiency and knowledge, passive and without much influence in society. (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 101 & 104; Nesmith, 2002: 27-28)

This paper proposes in the first place to look at the nature of archival work, which, due to a very narrow interpretation of archival mission statements, has become passive and isolated from the society, which the archives serve. Secondly, the new challenges archives have to face will be discussed and how these have forced archivists to become more actively involved, not only in the acquisition of records, but also in the way public programming (a planned sequence of community outreach projects and promotional activities which informs the wider community about archival holdings and services and involves its members directly in their documentary heritage (Ellis, 1993: 476)) is developed. In this regard the outreach projects of the University of Pretoria Archives (UPA) will be used as examples of how an archival institution can actively contribute to and involve the community. In conclusion the way in which the shift from passive preservation to active participation in the historical process is justified, will be discussed.

The nature of archival work

The future of archives seems more and more marginal. These institutions are perceived of as antiquated, negligible and uncompetitive in the electronic age, not willing to discard their outmoded resources and methods to meet the users' needs. (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 104) This view is in sharp contrast with that of the Canadian national archivist Arthur Doughty, who in the early 20th century stated that archives are the "most precious of all national assets" as they are the "gift of one generation to another", (Nesmith: 2002: 33) giving the present generation firm roots in the past so that it can blossom and prosper in the future. (Craig, 1997: 119; Heald, 1995: 122-123; Nesmith: 2002: 33)

Was Doughty's statement just a mumbling emerging from under the pile of garbage on another "prefesser's" desk, or does it hold some truth?

- **Mission**

At first glance the definition of an archival mission statement seems fairly simple and straightforward. A former Dutch national archivist, Eric Ketelaar, presents the archival mission as merely twofold - firstly that records should be preserved and secondly made available for use. (Ketelaar, 1992: 125) The archival mission

statement is conventionally defined as the identification, acquisition, description, preservation and provision of records of permanent and enduring value (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 102). If one interprets this definition superficially, it seems that Jenkinson was correct in his assumption that archivists are merely mechanical record-keepers or mirrors of society who work in isolation to collect undisputable, objective facts. (Diamond, 1994: 89-91; Stout, 2002: 13) A closer look at the definition of the archival mission statement, as well as the role archives play in society, reveals something far removed from the simple mechanical process that Jenkinson suggested.

The mission statement which the South African Society of Archivists proposes in the *Professional Code for South African Archivists*, begins with the following definition: "The archivist is responsible for ensuring the availability and use of permanently valuable archives by identification, acquisition, description and preservation". In this statement the usage of archival material is paramount and the other functions are put forward as being tools employed to achieve it. (Harris, 1994: 5, 10) The Canadian archivist, Timothy Ericson, endorses this statement and feels that all the work put into appraising, arranging, describing and preserving records, however skillfully and meticulously, is a waste of time if these records are not consulted. (Ericson, 1990-1991: 116-117)

- **Users**

Who are the users who would consult archival records? According to Bruce W. Dearstyne, author of *The Archival Enterprise* (American Library Association, 1993) the reason why archives are created and maintained comes from a "fundamental human need to create and store information, to retrieve and communicate it and to establish tangible connection with the past". (Greene, 2002: 44) This need to preserve information is not limited to governments or large organisations to ensure administrative and fiscal efficiency, but embraces and extends to the interests of ordinary people on various levels. (Ellis, 1993: 8; Harris, 1997: 4)

In a democracy, access to public archives give people the opportunity to exercise their civil rights and ensure governmental accountability. (Ellis, 1993: 8; Harris, 1997: 4; Ketelaar, 1992: 5) But archives touch people on a far more personal level as well. Through the records that are kept, archives ensure that the collective social and

cultural memory is preserved and communicated, thereby enriching and sustaining cultural traditions and values and helping to create a sense of identity and nationhood. (Foote, 1990: 100; Watson, 2002: 4)

Contrary to the notion of archives as institutions on the periphery of society, they serve as tools to empower people by enhancing human communication and building understanding between different generations. (Watson, 2002: 4) The scope of archival work therefore extends far beyond the judicial and administrative realm of society to embrace all aspects of human experience. (Ellis, 1993: 8; Harris, 1997: 4)

- **Custodianship**

The fact that personal service is the primary function and the use of archival records the ultimate goal of archival activity, does not in any way diminish the importance of the other archival functions. Archivists have to ensure that records of permanent value in their custody are identified, acquired, described, preserved and made available for use. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word custody as follows: safekeeping, protection, defense, charge, care and guardianship. (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 1993: 294)

The safekeeping of evidence is an integral part of archival duties. This is not limited to the physical preservation of records. Archivists have to ensure that the content is not distorted in any way by safeguarding the integrity of records. (Diamond, 1994: 89) This places an enormous responsibility on archivists and might give some insight to why an imbalance has emerged in the way the various archival functions are executed. (Craig, 1990-1991: 135; Ericson, 1990-1991: 116-117; MacNeil, 1994: 140-141)

The protection of the integrity of evidence entails that the impartiality of the record has to be protected and that a balanced view of decisions and events is reflected. Because of the important role archival records play in the judicial, legal and civil spheres of society, archivists have traditionally avoided any intervention in their decision-making and actions that could misrepresent the original meaning and jeopardise the impartial nature of the record. (MacNeil, 1994: 140)

Archivists hoped that they could create a work environment free from bias and environmental influences by adopting a modernist and positivist approach, which advocated the objective representation of the past by employing scientific methodologies. (Nesmith, 2002: 25, 28; Russell, 1991: 132) This entailed isolating themselves from the society in which they operated and employing the mechanical work procedure proposed by Jenkinson, so that they could capture a universal truth or an absolute objective view of society. (Greene, 2002: 51-52; MacNeil, 1994: 139; Stout, 2002: 13)

This approach is evident in archival outreach as public programming was limited to the publishing of finding aids and scientific works. (Craig, 1990-1991: 136) Serious scholarly research was encouraged at the expense of the public's participation, which archivists felt could contaminate the integrity and objectivity of their work. (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 109; Cook, 1990-1991: 126; Stout, 2002: 12)

New Challenges

In trying to create a so-called value-free work environment, the archival world has turned its back on the source of its holdings, namely human experience. An archival culture of neutrality and self-effacement has developed over the years, which does not reflect the true purpose of archives in society. In the past, the challenges presented by changes in society were such that archivists could avoid confronting this issue.
In the last few decades the rate and the scope of change have accelerated to such an extent that Leon Stout, 56th president of the Society of American Archivists, states that the archival profession is "on the brink of a new paradigm in its work environment". (Stout, 2002: 18) Renowned South African archivists Verne Harris, underlines the urgency of adapting to new challenges and feels that archivists will "invite disaster if they ignore the changes in the records environment". (Harris, 1997: 6) Archivists will have to re-examine the position of their institutions in society and to adapt to meet their users' needs. (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 102)

- **Technology**

The advent of electronic record-keeping has not only brought about what is aptly called an "explosion of information", but it has radically altered people's perceptions

of the use and availability of information (Craig, 1997: 120; De Beer, 1994: 5; Nesmith, 2002: 40)

According to the latest schools of thought, archivists have to adopt new appraisal strategies to cope with the enormous bulk of information generated in an electronic environment. (Cook, 1990-1991: 130) Instead of concentrating on the content of individual records, archivists have to shift their attention to the broader social and intellectual context in which these records are created, a theory called "macro-appraisal". (Cook, 1997: 81 & 84; Harris, 1997: 21; Nesmith, 2002: 35-36)

However, the core archival principle on which macro-appraisal is founded, namely the principle of provenance, as well as the principle of *respect des fonds* are severely challenged by the mutability of the information contained in these records and the rate in which technology changes. The archives can no longer expect to receive complete record series once these are no longer in use. (Harris, 1997: 20-21) Archivists have to become part of the record keeping process from as early as the planning stage, to understand the context in which records are created, to identify the key records, which will explain the context and ensure the proper physical and intellectual preservation thereof. This marks a radical change from the passive receiver and keeper role to an active participant in the activities of the institution, which the archives serve. (Nesmith, 2002: 39-40; Stout, 2002: 20-21)

- **Users**

Archivists are called upon to be actively involved, not only in the record-keeping process, but also in the way records are made available to users. Due to democratization, better education as well as greater availability of information in the electronic environment, people have become more aware of the important role information can play in the enhancement of their lives. (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 102; Cook, 1997: 12; Craig, 1990-1991: 135) The cultural importance that archival records play in offering citizens a sense of history, culture, identity and locality and provide them with personal and collective memories, have come to the foreground over the past few decades. (Watson, 2002: 4) Especially in times of change, people return to their history to find stability and anchorage in their past. (Cook, 1990-1991: 123; Stout, 2002: 12)

On a mundane, but highly practical note, being better informed empowers people to question governmental decisions and the way their tax-money is spent. As tax-funded institutions, archives have to justify their actions not only to their founding institution, but also to the people who fund their activities. (Grabowski, 1992: 468; Stout, 2002: 12, 15-16) In an era where government funding all over the world is decreasing and the competition for it increasing, public funded institutions have to show a greater responsibility towards the people they serve to validate their existence. (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 102-103)

Access to information is vital for citizens to make informed decisions. In most modern democratic countries legislation has been passed to address the question of access to information (Craig, 1990-1991: 135; Ketelaar, 1992: 9) and in South Africa specifically the *Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000.* (Government of South Africa, 2001-09-17) This act essentially defines and regulates public access to information held by the state; provides for the protection of personal information held by both state and private bodies and provides for the protection of whistleblowers in organs of the state. (Harris, December 1999: 2)

According to Harris, the Act establishes universities as governmental bodies. This has an enormous impact on how universities manage their information resources. It necessitates securing proper control over records and developing appropriate policies and procedures and training of staff. Record retention and disposal have to be undertaken with consideration to the legal implications thereof, for failure to do these things will expose the universities to potentially damaging and expensive legal proceedings, including lawsuits.[1] University archives benefit from the act in the sense that they can no longer be regarded as a mere dumping ground of old records, but as

[1] The core implications in terms of access to information and the protection of privacy for universities are amongst others that an information officer has to be appointed to administer the legislation; an information manual has to be published annually in which a detailed account of the university's functions, structures and information systems is given and that the public should have a right of access to all university records. Access can only be refused on one of the grounds defined in the Act.

an “accountability mechanism within an integrated management programme”. (Harris, December 1999: 2-3)

However, legislation alone will not ensure that people will be able to access the information they need. The public perception that archives are isolated, elitist institutions which provide state departments or companies with administrative and judicial justification (Blais & Emms, 1990-1991: 105; Cook, 1990-1991: 123) or where the select few academics can indulge in their interest in history (Grabowski, 1992: 465, 469-470) have to be replaced with an understanding that archives are, as stated by Eric Ketelaar “archives of the people, for the people, by the people”. (Ketelaar, 1992: 5-6)

Archivists have to be actively involved in building bridges between their institutions and the public (Brothman, 1991-1992: 75), they have to “take the archives to the people” (Harris, 1997: 12) and make it accessibly physically and intellectually. Public programming has to become the core around which other archival duties are planned and executed rather than an activity on the periphery of the archivist’s duties. (Cook, 1997: 12; Ericson, 1990-1991: 114; Russell, 1991: 132)

- **Public programming in practice**

There is currently a lively discussion among archivists on the questions of active participation and archiving in an electronic environment, as well as on public programming. Certain principles have been developed to give archivists guidelines on how to address these challenges by institutions such as the Society of American Archivists and Australian Society of Archivists.

Because archives are social institutions, which deal with human memory, there is no set formula on how archives should act in any given situation. Each archives has its unique situation in which it operates and therefore its own unique challenges. The guidelines set out to help archivists have to be flexible enough to encompass these individual situations. In the case of UPA active participation and public programming have been approached differently from what is set out in the general debate on these issues.

The University of Pretoria Archives as a case study

Almost a century ago, in 1908, the Transvaal University College (TUC) opened it doors and was granted university status in 1930 as the University of Pretoria (UP). However, it was only in 1978, almost three quarters of a century later, that the Director of the Library Services, Prof E.G. Gerryts, advocated that a university archives should be established. A committee was founded in that year, but was replaced a decade later with an *ad hoc* committee to investigate the possibility of establishing an archive. Although the Rectorate accepted the proposals of staff members of the Department of History in principle, no funding was made available. In 1994 the Registrar, Prof C.R. de Beer, raised the question of an archives again and a task team was appointed to investigate the matter anew. On 13 September 1994 the University Executive adopted the recommendations of the task team and the UPA was finally established. Initially the post of archival assistant was granted on a contract basis and that of director of the archives, which is still the case, is a post shared with the Department of Historical and Heritage Science. Given the financial and human resources constraints, the comparatively slow pace of actually establishing an archives at an institution of this kind is perhaps indicative of the persistent perception of the relegated place and status of the archives.

In line with the general archival trend, the stated mission of the UPA is to collect, arrange, describe, preserve and publicise information about the University and to serve as the University's "memory bank". Although the archives personnel have managed to collect records, including documents of the various academic and administrative departments, publications, photographs and objects dating back to the founding of the TUC, the late establishment of the archives has resulted in a collection which is not as complete or comprehensive as one would desire. Therefore one of the main activities of the UPA staff is to promote an awareness among students, academic and administrative staff and alumni alike on the importance of the archives

In addition the UPA is also faced with certain challenges, which influence the collection of material on current events on campus. Firstly, one of most important

and most frequently consulted UPA collections is its collection of photographs, which date back to the inception of the university in 1908. Due to the active involvement of the UP Public Relations Department, this collection was richly expanded to cover all aspects of campus life between 1955-1980. However, with the rationalization process in the 1990's, many of the services on campus were outsourced, one of those being that of the official campus photographer. Thus, from the mid 1990's onwards there is a very limited photographic record of events on campus.

Secondly, the greater percentage of records, including the photographs, reflects "official" campus life: the academic departments, important visitors, prize-giving functions and staff members. If one considers that the university is actually centered on students, it is alarming to think that this important element of campus life is not adequately represented. As the "memory bank" it is very important that the archives is able to record a balanced and comprehensive view of the university in the archival collection.

Thirdly the University of Pretoria has experienced a dramatic increase in student numbers, especially over the past decade (an average annual growth of 14%) (Annual Review 2002, University of Pretoria). Unfortunately, this increase has lead to a perception among students that they are merely a number in a big system and that their achievements went unnoticed. Moreover, twenty years ago, with fewer numbers, student participation in campus activities was more "inclusive". Now, the larger student body needs incentives to be enticed to participate in events. Besides apathy among a certain sector of the student body, there is also a high rate of ignorance as to the place and function of the archives, as well as the university's history and heritage.

To address the above-mentioned issues, the UPA initiated several projects:
In the first instance the UPA regularly mounts exhibits around campus to make staff, students and visitors aware of the existence of the archives and its function and role on campus. The aim is also to present the rich history of the university and draw their attention to the approaching centenary in 2008. These exhibitions do not only portrait the "official history", but also the untold stories that are part of every day life on campus.

An example of such a project is a photographic exhibition in the foyer of the offices of top management called *Landscapes and Portraits.* The one half of the exhibition space depicts the physical development of campus. Photographs of the buildings on the main and satellite campuses, from their construction to the present day, indicate how the buildings and the environment have changed over the years. The other half is photographs of students taken from the past ten decades. These highlight student activities such as student council elections and sport, and also the lighter side of student life such as rag and picnics.

Another project is concerned with the 21 hostels, which form an integral part of campus life. Through the enquiries received, the personnel of the UPA have realized that even though many hostels have some record of the past, they often neglect to record present events. For that reason, the UPA decided to launch a hostel scrapbook project. The aim of the project is to encourage the students to preserve a record of the current year's activities. This project has been launched with the co-operation of the Student Representative Council, which means that the hostels receive cultural points for their participation. Annually the various hostels on campus compete according to a system of accreditation on different levels, such as rag, academic achievement, sport and cultural activities. For the purposes of this, the students are expected to compile a record in the form of a scrapbook in which the events and the everyday life of their hostel in the next year is captured. Furthermore, points are awarded for the hostel archives and they are also rated for certificates of excellence.

A third project is the photographic competition for students, which was first launched in 2000. The aim was not only to make students aware of the archives and to enlarge the archives' photographic collection, particularly with a student perspective, but also to encourage students to look at their university from different point of view. Due to the enormous response and enthusiasm, the UPA decided to continue this project on an annual basis. The format was also changed and the competition is now coupled with a series of photographic workshops, presented by a professional photographer and for which the students receive certificates of attendance. At the workshops they are given assignments, specifically designed to enable them to master a specific technique and set out to reflect the different aspects of campus life required by the archives, namely buildings, academic life, sport, student and hostel life. The archives

receive these photographs, which are kept in a separate collection and hold copyright. This project is generously sponsored by two photographic companies and includes prizes of R10 000.

Certain questions arise from these projects. In the first place, the archives are not only actively involved in identification of records, which are worth preserving, but are prescribing which records have to be created. Are the archivists taking their authority too far and are they too actively involved in the archival process?

Secondly, will this intervention lead to collections, which are too subjective and present-minded? Are the archivists too concerned to address certain current needs and past imbalances that they do not look at the long-term implications of their collection policy?

Thirdly, are they unnaturally forcing the creation of records by bringing in a benefit aspect? The two student projects are based on a reward system and either by gaining cultural points for their hostel or prize money and skills for themselves, students are enticed to create records. Direct rewards, especially gained in a competitive way, are a foreign concept for archives, where the information that is acquired in research can lead to the enrichment of a person's life, but not necessarily measured in monetary terms.

The position of archives in a changing world

In their endeavour to reach out to their sponsors, are archivists starting to suffer from what the English archivist Nicholas Webb calls the "performing seal syndrome" (Harris, 1993: 12), or becoming what dr. Terry Cook of the National Archives of Canada, describes as a heritage supermarket, where the language of consumerism deafens sound archival practice and integrity? (Craig, 1990-1991: 137)

Archivists should guard against being too influenced by the current vogue in research and user needs. On the other hand, they should realize that by being an open social institution, archival work is not a mere continuation of record-keeping, where factual information on corporate decisions is kept, which as Ketelaar points out, is nothing

more than “dead masses of paper”. Records are living matter, which directly effect people’s lives and help them to come to grips with the past. (Ketelaar, 1992: 7)

The archival profession is interested in human welfare and affairs and "the preservation of the collective memory of societies". (Watson, 2002: 3) The primary function therefore is personal service. Archivists have a responsibility towards their public to act as mediators between them and the records, to ensure that the information gained from the archives will contribute to and add value to people’s lives through the safe-guarding of human rights, the promoting of learning and preserving and protecting the cultural values that bind a society together. (Stout, 2002: 12, 16)

According to the Canadian archivist, Brien Brothman, archivists act irresponsibly if they “shy away from participation in and criticism of the society” in which they function and that they deny themselves the unique and positive task of “providing intellectual resources for future generations and reaffirming the importance of cultural relationships”. (Brothman, 1991-1992: 77) Cook supports the active participation of archivists and feels that only through claiming their place in society as a whole that archivists will ensure that archives become “vital, living sites of meaning and memory” for the societies they serve. (Cook, 1997: 21)

Because archives function symbiotically with their environment, they will inevitably be influenced by the culture in which they function. The claims that archives can exist hermetically isolated from the world outside or that it is possible to give an objective account of the past, no longer hold validity. (Brothman, 1991-1992: 75) This subjective nature of archival work does not imply that it will lapse into relativism. (Russell, 1991: 131)

Although archivists should endeavor to develop their own objective criteria to appraise and ensure the integrity of records, the fact that the aim of archives is not to provide absolute truths should never be discarded. (Russell, 1991: 132) Archives are concerned with recording human experiences, which are rooted in convention and not in timeless truth. (Nesmith, 2002: 30-31) Archival records can only give the most impartial reflection of the values and norms of society. This representation of events

can however be meaningful by making decisions on selection and appraisal based on the involvement of the different interested parties. (Cook, 1997: 15-16; Greene, 2002: 53; Harris, 1993: 10)

Stout points out that the emphasis placed on public service does not entail that the importance of the record in archival work will fall away. What will change is the context within which the records are found. (Stout, 2002: 18) Archivists must therefore adopt a holistic perspective so that the provenance, order and context, rather than the facts and the figures contained in the records, will be preserved. (Cook, 1997: 130) In the case of the UPA, the fact that these photographic records are the result of a benefit-driven creation, contrary to the previous spontaneous student participation, reveals more about the UP and its students, and probably students at all campuses, at a certain time in history than the individual records would. As the coordinator of the photographic competition, students actually visit the UPA, and in turn are exposed to its activities and function. This conscientising, which is also an end result of the UPA campus exhibits and hostel scrapbook competition, also creates awareness and better positions the archives. This has led to students making more use of the UPA for projects and a resource for campus newspaper articles, while students and staff have also begun to contribute items to UPA.

According to Harris, "discarding traditional notions on archival participation and accepting that the subjective realm of the public is an important area of archival inquiry" (Harris, 1993: 10) are not merely easy post-modernists solutions to many of the burning questions on objectivity, appraisal standards and public accountability, but part of the reality in which the archives function. Effective public programming will solve more than fiscal concerns and questions on accountability. It is true that if people become aware of the vast potential of information housed in archives, that they would become advocates for that institution. (Grabowski, 1992: 465) But if archives can go even further and make people aware that it is truly their histories that will make the difference in the future, that their stories are important to be told and preserved (Watson, 2002: 6), that they will become originators of records themselves and that they will actively try and help build their own houses of memory. (Cook, 1997, 13; Nesmith, 2002: 38)

Archivists have to realize that the world in which they function is not static, but dynamic and ever changing. To move from passive preserving to active participation in and shaping of the historical process, archives have to be open to change and be willing to grow with society. This is not only vital for the continued existence of the archives, but also to enable society to retain its values, to preserve a vision of a better world and for civil stability in general. (Cook, 1997, 20; Harris, 1993: 6)

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