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Selection, deaccessioning, and the public image of information professionals: Learning from the mistakes of the past

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Abstract

The image of librarians, archivists and other information professionals has been affected in recent decades by public misunderstanding of selection and deaccessioning decisions. Librarians counter critiques from publicly available sources, such as Nicholson Baker's book *Double Fold*, by publishing articles in professional journal literature. This article explores recent headlines generating controversy around selection and weeding issues at libraries, museums, and archives, including cases at the New York Public Library, Buffalo Museum of Science, Birmingham Public Library, and Bowling Green State University. It concludes that a public institution must initiate public dialogue to portray necessary collection development tasks in a positive light to administrators and the general public.

A Case for Clear Policy and Transparency

In the decades since the computer changed the way that people create and receive information, librarians and archivists have found they have an image problem. This is not breaking news and there has been a

good deal of hand-wringing over this issue, but there has been little study into ways we can change public opinion and indeed some aspects of the problem are largely out of our control. One aspect of the problem we can address is public misunderstanding about the nature of librarianship regarding selection and deaccessioning decisions. Information professionals can initiate a public dialogue about these activities, working within and across disciplines to portray the necessary tasks of selection and deaccessioning in a positive light to administrators and the general public.

A spate of highly publicized deaccessioning decisions has made headlines around the country in the last few years. The controversy generated by these decisions has implications for information professionals in museum, business, academic, and public libraries, and archives nationwide. Because selection and deaccessioning policies are related, all types of collections are examined here together, using real-life examples to demonstrate how unambiguous policy statements, clearly-communicated selection decisions, transparent deaccessioning processes, and savvy communication with the public can advance library mandates, enhance our standing as professionals, and help assure that libraries and archives receive the funding and administrative support they need. Neutral professionalism and well executed public relations in support of well thought policies will go a long way towards cementing a positive professional image in the public eye and help us achieve both institutional and collective goals.

Policy and Librarianship

A great deal of bad publicity for librarians and archivists has been the result of poorly handled deaccessioning projects. As Frank Boles (2005) comments, "having watched our friends and colleagues in the library world undergo severe criticism...it seems clear to me that a significant part of the problem was a gap between library rhetoric and library practice" (p. xv). How can information professionals use the lessons of our colleagues' missteps to avoid future misunderstandings? The public image of information professionals will be enhanced if we deal appropriately with the disposal of materials deemed duplicates, out-of-scope, deteriorated beyond salvage, or otherwise unworthy of continued maintenance in the collection (Cox, 1993, p. 195-231). Yet policies alone are not enough.

No institution is inherently free from potential controversy, because no institution has unlimited space, money, or staffing. Decisions must be made about allocation of resources and intellectual focus. A clearly defined policy and detailed procedures provide an intellectual basis and support for decisions; documenting selection procedures will bolster the image of librarians and archivists as professionals. Policy statements are tools. They state publicly the goals and directions of the scope of the collection, but it is up to the librarian or archivist to interpret policies and define why certain items need to be deaccessioned. While there will always be critics who say that every physical characteristic of every copy of every edition is potentially relevant, information professionals do not and should not select for potential relevance. Deaccessioning will only be accepted as necessary and even desirable by administrators and the public when information professionals embrace selection and introduce transparency into the selection process.

Of course, selection will always be subjective and therefore open to criticism. The modern information professional cannot doubt that there will be attacks, and one in particular may take decades to counteract: Nicholson Baker's 2001 *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. Baker's

attack on librarians has been ably rebutted by numerous professionals, and I shall not attempt to join their ranks here. However, it is important to note that the majority of these rebuttal articles were published within the professional literature and will not affect the opinion of the public, resource allocators, or institutional administrators. We must try harder to close the gap between the rhetoric of transparency and the corollary practice of deaccessioning; to ignore the problem will prove detrimental to the profession, its ordinary functions, and its future. We lose credibility as a profession when we advocate for transparency and community involvement yet attempt to hide procedures behind walls of bureaucracy and rhetoric.

How then are we to move from the image of a "quiet professional, carrying out an admired but comparatively subterranean activity" (Levy & Robles, 1984, p. iv) with esoteric intellectual interests, to the image of a thoughtful, responsible decision maker with a vision for making accessible an enormous amount of information contained in a multitude of formats? Long past are the days when information professionals could pretend to be neutral retainers and organizers of records. Today's librarians and archivists must be involved in the selection of information, and must document their decisions, particularly as pertains to the deaccessioning process. Only by creating such documentation will information professionals be able to articulate to the public what artifacts and information are retained, and why.

The Image of Archivists, Public and Institutional

In 1984, the Society of American Archivists was concerned enough about the image of archivists to commission a study by Sidney J. Levy and Albert Robles of Social Research, Inc. The SAA was interested in the image of archivists among resource allocators, reflecting a reasonable concern that if the institutional decision makers do not believe in the mission and purpose of the archives, it becomes very difficult to justify budgets of any meaningful size. What Levy and Robles found was that "archives have a low priority" among resource

allocators and that "archivists are hampered in seeking resources" by the perception among allocators of lack of immediacy (Levy & Robles, 1984, p. ii). In other words, resource allocators may think archives are important in the abstract, but do not necessarily see them as pressing concerns requiring meaningful and timely financial support.

Yet there is a pressing need for significant financial support for libraries and archives—inadequate funding results in de facto deaccessioning. Library collections are in the public eye more than many information professionals may believe, and the reaction of the public to an institution that fails to care adequately for its holdings will inevitably be negative. Worse, as materials deteriorate, they will require increasingly expensive conservation efforts, which may or may not successfully restore delicate materials to a state in which they may be safely handled by researchers. In turn, archivists will have to take more drastic steps to protect the collections, contributing to a public image as "territorial and possessive, ambivalent about sharing and serving" (Levy & Robles, 1984, p. iii). Librarians will undoubtedly be painted with the same brush.

However, there are signs that public pressure can influence budget decisions. Recently the New York Times ran an article about a study commissioned by Heritage Preservation, conducted in conjunction with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, finding that "many...collections are threatened by poor environmental controls, improper storage, inadequate staffing and financing and poor planning for emergencies like floods" (Clementson, 2005, E3). While such reports are certainly useful for educating administrators, media coverage also serves to publicize the issues of archival work, in this particular case the effects of lack of funding. The purpose of this study was "to help institutions assess the state of their collections....Another [was] to convince government agencies, private foundations and governing boards of institutions that they need to direct money not just toward acquiring objects, but also toward their preservation" (Clementson, E3). This is a prime example of the proactive use

of studies and media coverage to bolster the public idea that archives are important, and that archivists are professionals in need of appropriate support to do their jobs adequately.

Rather than allowing uncataloged books and documents to deteriorate unexamined, selection involves intellectual decision-making about the mission of an institution, the user base it serves, and an analysis of how the materials in the collection serve these purposes. It is vital that information professionals be proactive in campaigning for adequate resources, be articulate in their selections of how and where to distribute those resources, and be transparent in the decision-making process so as to avoid public misunderstandings. While we cannot and should not save everything, we can articulate our selection criteria and advocate for the best possible care of the objects we retain.

Controversy and Deaccessioning Decisions

Even with the proper tools, such as policy documents and lucid communication with the public and administrative support, information professionals can expect that the deaccessioning of large quantities of items of exceptional value may generate some controversy. The New York Public Library recently prompted an outcry when it auctioned several paintings that had been in its collection since its founding. Some of the public was outraged by the sale despite the fact that the New York Public Library's collections policy states it does not collect paintings and that it is unable to provide proper storage or care for the paintings (Vogel, 2005). A large part of the controversy stemmed from the paintings being sold in order to "shore up its endowment fund," (Bone, 2005) rather than replacing items of value to the collection, and possibly because one of the prominent paintings was sold at auction to Wal-Mart heiress Alice L. Walton (Genocchio, 2006). While certainly there was some reason to be concerned about the fact that a formerly publicly owned item now rests in private hands, the New York Public Library was able to demonstrate that the paintings were

out of scope and not being properly cared for, and ultimately the only ill effect was some temporary bad press.

In 1994 when the Buffalo Museum of Science's Research Library announced the decision to sell some first editions from its collection, "the reaction to the news was swift, and most of it was negative" (Walters, 1999, p. 269). The community's reaction to the impending sale of the "Milestones of Science" collection was unusual in its intensity, in part because "the community's involvement in the acquisition succeeded in fostering a sense of ownership, such that its threatened sale in 1994 became a controversial issue for Buffalo residents" (Walters, p. 262). Kathryn Leacock, lecturer in museum studies at Buffalo State College, previously the museum's librarian, comments, "The reason this process was given such negative publicity was due to miscommunication and misinterpretation" (personal communication, Nov. 10, 2006). By negotiating with a companion institution, the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, and communicating openly with the community, the Museum alleviated concerns about "cultural strip mining." The successful sale enabled it to attain its goal of financial stability, but not before accusations that the Museum was "holding a garage sale" had made it into the press (Walters, p. 269). Leacock says, "Even though a decade has passed since the collection was deaccessioned, its effect on the existing collection remains" (personal communication). In this case, the Museum reacted by clearly communicating its goals, being willing to negotiate with the community, and being flexible in how it achieved its goals.

As with the Buffalo Museum of Science, community outcry dogged the Pequot Library of Southport, which wanted to sell 38 rare books of great value in order to bring the remainder of the collection back to the city. Much of the public library's holdings had been housed at Yale since the 1950s due to the library's inability to pay for proper care and upkeep, and when the housing agreement came up for renewal, Yale made ownership of the collection a condition of continued maintenance of the collection. To

finance appropriate housing and proper care of the majority of the collection's return, the library decided to sell some of the gems of the collection. However, a descendent of the original donor filed suit to prevent the sale of any items from the original donation. Although the library was not able to prevent the suit, its handling of the publicity over its decision to deaccession was well coordinated and well publicized, grounded in a policy decision "ten years in the making" (Slocum, 2005, p. 1). The executive director was able to alleviate the public's concerns by couching the decision in terms of thoughtful decision-making. Dan Snyder, the executive director, stated that "great collections aren't static...they are always improving, and growing around a clear focus" (Slocum). Mr. Snyder's comments do credit to the public and the profession by de-mystifying the selection process.

Kathryn Leacock notes, concerning the Buffalo Museum of Science, "As the staff changes, so too does the collecting mission of the Library. The collection of the Research Library is not static, it exists to support a Museum of Science. Science is a dynamic subject matter that is under constant revision" (personal communication, Nov. 10, 2006). Libraries perform dual and sometimes conflicting functions of preserving historical records, and of serving current and future users' research needs. This inherent tension cannot be avoided, but it can be addressed so that the public is aware of the necessity of unpopular selection issues. The public has a right and a need to be aware of decisions that are being made in their name, and have some opportunity to communicate their opinions and concerns.

While information professionals have little control over the way newspapers and other media outlets portray library deaccessioning issues, it does not mean we are powerless. Public statements, policy, and neutral professionalism will go a long way towards mitigating the effects of reporters' ineptitude or even outright hostility. Regardless of the old adage, "there's no such thing as bad press," for many information professionals the experience is a negative one. Given that many information professionals would never

expect to find themselves the subject of a public scandal, negative press can be very difficult to contend with, particularly when one's professional competency is under fire.

Such a case happened to the Birmingham Public Library in Alabama, which holds the Tutwiler Collection of Southern History and Literature, a well regarded genealogy and local history collection. In 2005, the library began an in-depth appraisal and inventory to "protect thousands of books, pamphlets and other historical materials, including valuable artifacts that have never been entered into the library's catalog system" (Witt, 2005, ¶ 3). In an email to the (now defunct) *Birmingham Post-Herald*, Crider wrote, "The Tutwiler Collection is being torn apart by resentful, vindictive, under-educated administrators and board members" (Witt, ¶ 7). This is not the sort of press that helps administrators and the public view librarians as highly trained professionals working towards clearly defined institutional goals.

Genealogy researchers can be a tremendous boon to small institutions, as they are frequently the most consistent users of the collection and will often organize effective grassroots campaigns against budget cuts. However, in Crider's case, passionate concern for these items led him to a vengeful crusade against the institution itself, and the library reacted by filing a lawsuit against him to regain custody of the books he had taken from the dumpster. In turn, Crider has found a lawyer to represent him free of charge and declares that "he will return the books if he can be guaranteed that they will not be discarded and that the complaint will be dropped" (Witt, 2005, ¶ 9). While this impasse was clearly born of missteps on both sides, it would be difficult to assert that there was anything to be gained by the library's decision to file suit against Crider, at least from a public relations standpoint.

Library Director Barbara Sirmans admitted that the deaccessioning had been badly handled. "The greatest mistake...was in not explaining the project to the public before late 2004, when large volumes of material began to be moved around [within the building]" (Witt, 2005, ¶ 24). Furthermore,

the library did not publicize its efforts to find new homes for its unwanted items, nor did it respond to accusations with statements grounded in policy or goals for the collection. Explaining the project and the possibility of deaccessioning materials to the public would have been a good place to start.

While there is no single set of rules applicable to all institutions, the problem with covert deaccessioning is that if it is discovered, public outcry is likely to be all the more wrathful. Providing misguided but well-intentioned users a reason to go to the press with their complaints does not reflect well upon any institution, particularly if the library operates as part of a larger organization. Given that libraries and archives are so often at the bottom of the list when it comes to funding disbursements, librarians and archivists cannot afford to embarrass the parent institution lest sorely-needed funds be directed elsewhere.

Public Relations, Funding, and Selection Decisions

As the archival community has become more aware of the relationship between public relations, funding, and selection, some librarians and archivists have stepped forward to defend their colleagues in the press. This has great potential benefits for all information professionals, and should be encouraged. When the Bowling Green State University Center for Archival Collections made campus news for refusing to accept a collection of papers about Vietnam-era massacres, the Tiger Force collection, Richard Pearce-Moses, the president of the Society of American Archivists, responded:

"Archivists spend significant time developing collecting policies. Such policies help establish what kinds of materials merit the investment of limited resources for storage, staffing, and preservation.... Archives often expand their scope of collections, but only after ensuring that they have the resources to support those new directions.... The fact that other archives wanted the collection does not suggest that the Bowling Green

Center for Archival Collections erred when it declined the gift. Rather, it indicates that the staff had the professionalism to concentrate on what it does best." (Pearce-Moss, 2005)

Although the archivist at the Bowling Green Center for Archival Collections had clearly stated her reasons for rejecting the collection to the donor, the Vice President of the University complained publicly that she had not been informed of the offering and implied that she was unhappy with the decision. Pearce-Moss's letter highlights the archivist's reasons for not accepting the collection, grounds the decision in intellectual reasoning, and emphasizes the nature of the selection process as an inherent aspect of the profession. By speaking out toward common goals of advocacy and professionalism, librarians and archivists can collectively articulate why a theoretical grounding is necessary in library work and demonstrate the practical restraints of their work to the public and to administrators.

Just how likely is it that a routine decision-making process will make local news? It is difficult to say, but Richard Cox attempted to quantify the number of archival issues that appeared in the New York Times during an eight-month span from 1992-1993. Cox chose to study this topic because "in the early 1980s the American archival profession discovered that they had a public image; part of this occurrence was the discovery that they didn't like their public image" (Cox, 1993, p. 196). Cox found that in cultural reporting, archives were regularly mentioned, usually focusing on historical manuscripts, exhibitions, and similar uses. As with administrators, the public might not think of archives and libraries as immediately important, but the public does appear to be aware of the importance of archives in the abstract. Although professionals view archives and libraries as functional institutions serving particular needs with set resources, to much of the public they are important cultural symbols.

Also, the public has in recent years been apprised of the dangers of deteriorating

items and budgets as more activist users—often users like Crider—have spoken out against the detrimental effects of budget cuts on library collections. In fiction, most recently in the popular novels of Dan Brown, archives are often portrayed as possessing a dormant power, holding records that might contain uncomfortable or even dangerous truths. However, the power intrinsic to the archives does not extend to the professional in charge of the collection. Ironically, this concept of the latent power in library and archival holdings may work against information professionals, for if one refuses or discards something of perceived value, is one not also meddling with history itself?

Librarians and archivists faced a very public embarrassment in the form of Nicholson Baker's attack upon microfilming as preservation method in his book, *Double Fold*. Frank Boles cites Baker's book directly as an example of the type of attack archivists may find themselves subjected to if the profession is unable to articulate its purposes and ideas as Richard Pearce-Moses so ably did on behalf of BGSU's archives. Boles wrote,

"Rather than wait for the archival version of *Double Fold* to appear in print, it seems wise for me to adopt archival terminology that conveys as accurately as possible to the public what we do with documents. The truth is, archivists select very few records and consign the vast majority of documents to the dumpster. It is time the profession used an accurate word, rather than a euphemism, to describe this activity." (Boles, p. xv)

He argues that selection is a more appropriate term than appraisal for choosing what documents will be retained in an archive: "Appraisal is an opaque word that to a significant degree disguises the point of what the archivist is doing....Appraisal suggests to the public that archivists [are]...engaging in something more nefarious: trashing records" (Boles, 2005, p. xv). Perhaps it is time for information professionals of all stripes to adopt the spirit of Boles' words.

Selection for the Future

Ultimately, the way in which libraries or archives contends with negative publicity will depend upon the particulars of the event. A calmly rational response will underscore our professionalism and the necessity of selection. Documenting appraisal decisions, outlining steps taken in the deaccessioning process and communicating with administrators and the public are the best ways for archivists to cement a reputation of professionalism in the archival profession. For example, if the Birmingham Public Library had offered those duplicate copies to ten similar institutions, but no one wanted them, it would have appeared more justified in discarding the objects than they did by quietly stacking them in the dumpster. If an archives is part of an institution with a public relations office, coordinating with that office prior to making statements to the press will impress administrators, which may help convince them to support selection decisions.

There has been a great deal of energy expended on outreach and public programming at many libraries and archives in recent years. Such programming is useful in making collections visible to the public, but its applications do not end there. Outreach initiatives can also be used to communicate with the public about ongoing library issues, thus building public support. As Karen Lamoree noted, "to take a lesson from the advertising world, if one says something long enough, often enough, and loud enough, people will buy the product" (Lamoree, 1995, p. 151). The same holds true here. Librarians and archivists must make the case to the public that the era of the "keeper" mentality, passively collecting and hoarding small collections, is both an outdated image and an outdated model of information retention.

As Boles (2005) attests, "the ultimate danger in the keeper mentality in the twenty-first century is that it can serve as a powerful framework through which nonarchivists can assert and demonstrate the professional incompetence of archivists" (p. 7). Information professionals are specifically trained to deal with allocating resources in order to

preserve and make available information. What may not be immediately clear to the public is that we are also trained to factor in more than dollar signs and square feet when considering the value of a collection, or that simply because a collection has value, any old repository will do. Demonstrating that deaccessioning is a part of being a responsible, thoughtful, and committed information professional is a crucial step towards transparency. Nonprofessionals have a right to be heard and their concerns thoughtfully considered, but professionals are the appropriate decision makers. However, it is to everyone's advantage that we communicate why they are being made, and how outsiders' concerns are being addressed. Boles rightly states that archivists select, and are the most appropriate selectors, because "they are the best trained professionals to do this task," and because "selection is a societal requirement" (Boles, p. 7). Selection is an act of responsibility both for the present and the future, not an example of professional incompetence, and should be articulated as such.

Yet we cannot create a transparent process in a vacuum. In order to achieve this goal, it is critical that archivists continue to listen to their users and take their concerns into account, even when they conflict with the library's operative needs. It is possible to avoid the complete breakdown of communication embodied by the imbroglio between David Crider and the Birmingham Public Library, but it will require open communication between the library community and the public, a respect and understanding of the nature and purpose of archives, and unified advocacy on the part of information professionals in all types of institutions.

Conclusion

Archivists and librarians face similar deaccessioning issues, and the lessons can translate from one practice to the other. It is also important not to forget the role of tradition in some aspects of librarianship. "Librarians rooted in tradition raise important points about the value of traditional scholarly communication," says Elizabeth Breakstone

(2005, p. B20). Boles (2005) is careful to point out that for certain collections, the keeper mindset is in fact preferable, as in the case of those who document small communities or extremist political groups, where precious little documentary evidence may be found (p. 6). Breakstone notes that "too often, it's the stereotype-fulfilling librarians who get the press." Yet she foresees a positive future, one in which librarians integrate their talents and services and work together to publicize the value of their work:

"When I think about the library I'll be working in 30 years from now...I have no idea what my work environment will look like. But when I speak with friends who are also new in the field, I sense excitement and empowerment rather than anxiety. Like me, they find it exhilarating to work in a profession with such an open future—a future, mind you, that will be shaped by us." (p. B20)

The power of libraries and archives, both intrinsic and perceived, lies in the value of the collection, which brings together diverse objects around a central intellectual purpose. So does the value of the profession depend upon each individual upholding the highest values and working collectively to define our profession. Librarians demonstrate our professionalism best by communicating clearly and calmly with the public and administrators to secure support for institutional initiatives, demystifying the selection process, and following unambiguous selection policies.

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