

Archives to the Rescue

Building Support Communities for Artifact Preservation

Kim Allen Scott

In a recent *New York Times* editorial, Nicholas Kristof tried to strike a blow for planetary optimism. In his essay “The Best News You Don’t Know,” Kristof cited statistics that give reasons for celebrating mankind’s important advancements against poverty, but one curious tidbit stands out. “For the entire history of the human species until the 1960s, a majority of adults were illiterate,” claimed the writer, “Now 85 percent of adults worldwide are literate and the share is rising.”¹ While one might take heart that millions of humans have taken this first step to rise above a lifetime of penury, one might also ask the obvious follow up question: exactly *WHAT* are they reading? I suggest to you that the answer is “not a whole heck of a lot.”

It is no secret that serious, deep reading in America is in serious, deep trouble. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has revealed that a mere forty-three percent of adults read at least one work of literature in the previous year, even while expanding the definition of “literature” to include short works that appear on websites, eBooks, and magazines. “That’s the lowest percentage in any year since NEA surveys began tracking reading and arts participation in 1982, when the literature reading rate was fifty-seven percent,” reports Christopher Ingraham of the *Washington Post*.² In 2007 the NEA presented chilling empirical evidence that nearly half of all Americans ages eighteen to twenty-four read no books at all, and that a minority of American high school seniors are even able to read at or above a basic level of comprehension.³ One can argue a number of things contribute to these awful numbers such as the internet, television, and political campaigns that insist stupidity is a virtue, but the fact remains that in America the entire concept of reading large blocks of text for silent, concentrated reflection is going the way of the dodo. And what are librarians doing about the extinction of the reading ethic? Again the answer is “Not a whole heck of a lot.”

Two centuries ago, practitioners of an important manufacturing trade fought a desperate and ultimately futile war against steam powered looms. As the Luddites smashed the machines that threatened their livelihood, they fought a losing battle

against “progress,” but fast forward to the present day and the situation is entirely reversed. Contemporary American librarians are embracing the machine that is making their profession obsolete in a futile attempt to find a role in its use. However, just as the most talented handloom weaver would find his expertise largely irrelevant in the configuration of a power loom, librarians are experiencing an evaporating demand as the Google generation avoids the reference desk and seems perfectly willing to rely on Wikipedia and Facebook for all of life’s questions. Even though librarians are desperately throwing themselves between user and computer screen to play the role of information referees, most people are shoving them out of the way so they can resume watching the latest cute cat videos. Librarian accommodation for all things digital can also be seen in their workplace. Once considered the source of information storage in the form of paper resources, libraries are now slowly converting their buildings into bookshelf-decorated internet cafes, petting zoos, “maker spaces,” and yoga studios. To make room for these irrelevancies, they discard as rubbish the books they once gathered with so much dedication and passion.

To state the situation bluntly, we can no longer afford to rely on a preservation ethic among librarians because their contemporary emphasis is on “information,” and that information is becoming digital by default. Librarians at American universities seem reluctant to even use the word “library” itself, choosing instead the more trendy “information commons” to label their computer-dominated domiciles. Even the American professional literature of librarians has produced articles that bemoan the fact that their facilities are branded by their alleged outdated function as book repositories.⁴ Huge collections of bound journals are daily discarded as their digital surrogates become available for library acquisition, and the shift of a business model that formerly stressed the ownership of information to one that simply rents information continues unchecked. Bound volumes have been assigned a peripheral place in American academic libraries much like the embarrassing bachelor uncle at a family dinner who is placed at the end of the table where his belching can be quietly tolerated.

Into this dismal situation I present to you a hero to save the day: the archivist. Long recognized as a professional information manager who’s responsibly balances the conflicting demands of access and preservation, the archivist is the right person to

staunch the bleeding flow of discarded books from American public and academic libraries. By assuming the traditional role of the librarian, the archivist can and will keep the volumes which are routinely weeded by those who use circulation metrics to justify their bibliocidal rampage. To seriously argue for widespread acceptance of archivists as book custodians, I have launched a humorous online campaign to advocate for the persistence of the real, (which you must admit fits in well with the theme of this conference). I have labeled this campaign *True Archives*.

In 2013 after years of observing a decline of reading among my students (and the concurrent massacre of books by my employing library) I began to express my frustration by idly transforming the provocative cover art of pulp detective paperbacks and comic books. At first I had no real agenda other than to raise a smile among a very limited and trusted circle of friends who felt the same as I (and who also had tenure protection if the emails fell into the wrong hands.) Although no one taught me how to do it, I slowly learned the ins and outs of the Adobe Photoshop software. I had to figure out how to use the powerful graphic arts tools imbedded in that software by hit and miss (mostly miss). During a long period of experimentation I eventually learned how to use the rubber stamp feature to clone surrounding artwork for obscuring the original titles on any given cover. Slowly I found I could recognize type fonts, and use other tools to bend and distort them to match the original as I composed venomous replacement text to mock growing illiteracy among young people, fawning accommodation for their limited attention spans, and the horrifying destruction of library paper resources. I decided early on that I would try to work the words “archivist” or “archives” into as many titles that I could to advance my argument that archives will be the inevitable inheritors of library collections.

With all the artwork that I had banked during my weeks of experimentation, I knew I could sustain a substantial run of display postings and began in 2014 an online blog and Twitter campaign to promote archival management of library collections. I had to be careful with the covers I chose, however, because the artwork that defines pulp magazines and paperback books is overwhelmingly misogynistic, and I knew once I went public with my creations I would likely alienate my audience if I used too many pictures of scantily clad women in compromising poses. Once I winnowed down my

creations to the most benign images I chose Google to host the blog displaying the covers and the curmudgeonly essays I wrote to accompany them. That was easy enough, but I found the manipulation of Twitter to be much more difficult. Unlike Earth's younger human inhabitants, I have always felt that the creator bestowed opposable thumbs on me for purposes other than typing. However, after I found the online version of this popular communication tool and learned the purpose of all those weird hashtags I was able to tweet with the best of them. The stage was set for my campaign. I began with frequent postings on both servers, using my artwork to attract attention and to nettle the complacent, and within a few weeks I had a modest following that I have been building on to the present day.

Every hero needs a nemesis, but in the world of *True Archives* I am forced into the delicate dance between bantering criticism of contemporary libraries and avoiding the outright hostility of my colleagues. In other words I must argue that libraries can no longer be trusted as the custodians of the codex and yet still trust that my coffee cup in the staff lounge is free from strychnine. To this end I have created pair of straw men to vilify that has allowed me to mock my library colleagues without actually naming them. These two threatening characters are the Information Scientist and his loathsome sidekick, the Biblioposer. Add to these fictitious villains a healthy dose of humor and art and so far I have avoided any overt assassination attempts.

It must be admitted that the library profession has definitely assisted in my satirical skewering and helped advance my main goal of the *True Archives* campaign. Of the forty-seven American universities that currently host accredited graduate education programs fourteen, or more than a third, have even dropped the word "library" from their official titles, substituting the term "information" in what is probably a desperate ploy to justify their ungodly tuition fees.⁵ Consider for a moment: if one graduates from an "information" school, why insist on the professional title of "Librarian"? Doesn't "Information Scientist," "Informationist" or "Cybrarian" make more sense? The newly minted graduates of these schools who spend more time on the screen than the printed page yet embrace the trope of trusted book custodians when it suits their purpose I have dubbed "Biblioposers." I have been so successful in coining this pejorative term that if you try a Google search for it, my blog is the first web page

you will hit. If my campaign results in nothing else, I would like to advance the notion that the honored title of “Librarian” be reserved for those who actually curate the physical codex.

Aside from casting such a jaundiced eye on my colleagues in the library world, I have also used *True Archives* to express a humorous view of various aspects of my own profession. In the United States, archivists who work within the organizational structure of an academic library are constantly under pressure to solicit, purchase, steal, or otherwise get their hands on new acquisitions. This competition for research material is a ripe area for humor, even though in reality it sometimes has serious consequences. I remember distinctly that the closest I ever came to being sacked during my career happened when I followed my dean’s orders to solicit some material that had been promised to another repository and he threw me to the wolves when that other repository complained about our attempted collection sniping.

Other areas of archival management that can provide more than a chuckle or two is public service. I have poked fun at patrons who demand the reading room rules apply to everyone but themselves, and those rare but dangerous visitors who actually wish to mutilate our holdings for resale to collectors. Vendors who deal with these purloined prints, the “breakers,” are hardly a subject for laughter, but they have not escaped my jaundiced notice either.

Contemporary archivists are under constant pressure to scan the records in their care and forced to give item level descriptive metadata to the resulting images. Not only is this practice as stupid as cataloging the individual pages of a book, it also represents a disingenuous attempt to give end users the illusion they are actually conducting archival research by idly clicking on a few display icons. Another reason to complain about the process is the possibility that the ultimate goal of such digital rendering is the destruction of the originals. This has certainly been the case with printed resources, so why would we feel archival materials are exempt from such a fate?

Other areas of my profession are ripe for satire. Development work, or the institutionalized solicitation of operating funds from the public is an ongoing pressure most archivists would agree is as enjoyable as a trip to the dentist and worthy of a few

broadsides. The main aspect of archival work, that of arranging and describing manuscript collections provides excellent comic material. The discovery of petrified rubber bands, ancient rodent droppings, locks of human hair, or other body parts in an individual's papers have caused more than a few shudders of horror as well as laughter. Finally, donor relations, complicated by descendants demanding the return of their ancestor's material, can sometimes land an archivist in the courtroom or the madhouse.

But the biggest joke of my website is its existence itself, because you really didn't believe I would point out the hypocrisy of others while failing to recognize it in myself. What I do with the *True Archives* blog is to continually use the internet to warn readers about continually using the internet. This joke is not lost on many of my readers since their only access to my artwork and essays is through the very medium that I insist that I loathe. When they DO get the joke, nothing is more satisfying for a satirist, and I can happily report at this date that my website has been visited over 6,500 times, and over 250 misguided souls follow me on Twitter every day. Although I have no idea how many of my readers are fellow professionals or simply interested civilians, I am encouraged by this outreach and am still hopeful that it will broaden the discussion on who, and what institutions, are best suited to assume the custodianship of the planet's printed legacy in the future. If reading my rantings on the internet can help further this dialogue, so much the better, and who knows? Perhaps my constant grumbling may convince a few people to actually pick up a book and read it before they are all gone.

NOTES

¹Nicholas Kristof, "The Best News You Don't Know," *New York Times*, September 22, 2016.

²Christopher Ingraham, "The long, steady decline of literary reading," *Washington Post*, September 7, 2016.

³National Endowment for the Humanities, *To Read or Not to Read; A Question of National Consequence* (Washington D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 2007), 5. Ironically, this important study is only available on the internet in the library where I work.

⁴The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Information Science, The University of Washington Information School, and the Syracuse School of Information Studies, are all

examples of graduate programs that have jettisoned the word Alibrary@ from their titles. Calling the association of books with the library brand Adisturbing, @ one writer has advised librarians to ape the internet=s convenience to change public perceptions. Roy Tennant, ADigital Libraries: The Library Brand,@ *Library Journal*, 131, 1 (January, 2006): 38.

⁵“List of American Library Association accredited library schools” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_American_Library_Association_accredited_library_schools (accessed October 15, 2016)