A Not So Personal Bias: Money and Politics in Archives
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Most archival literature these days widely accepts the notion that collections unavoidably reflect the personal biases of their collectors. The idea of personal bias overtaking the archives is so prominent that many professionals describe it as 'hardly novel' (Tyacke, 2001) or even obvious fact (Duckett, 1975; Pell, 2015). But an archivist's personal bias might not always be so personal; there are all kinds of external factors that can make up and change a person's mind. There's also the fact that archivists (as much as they'd probably like) typically don't hide in solitude and build collections guided solely on their own preferences, but are regularly forced to respond to all kinds of pressures from other people, whether those be coworkers, superiors, friends, or the general public. We might like to imagine that archivists always have truth, history, the education of the people, etc. as their only motivators when appraising materials, but we can't forget that archives are usually parts of larger organizations with numerous departments and conflicting agendas. Such organizations, especially those run by nonprofit or government institutions, are constantly making decisions about money while trying to earn public favor.

We will start this discussion with the topic of money, because money is arguably at the base of all other external forces that can affect an archivist's decision-making, but the discussion will inevitably sprawl into the topics of social pressures and public opinion. Archivists are not immune to the powers of the dollar; if anything, they are probably among the most sorely aware of what a lack of funding can mean for their operations. Think of every instance you possibly can of an archive, museum, or library being forced to downsize or completely shut down and you'd be hard pressed to find one scenario where the main reason wasn't lack of financial support (Grabowski, 1985). Just one example is the closing of the National Archives in Seattle this year because the city's Public Buildings Reform Board recommended the sale of the building as a means to 'trim federal properties deemed excess' (Lacitis, 2020).

Because archives are often desperately in need of adequate funding to maintain their operations, the fear of angry donors and fundraisers frequently dictates an archivist's collection strategy. Archives are often forced to accept gifts that they don't want or can't really afford to maintain in an effort to keep donors happy (Grabowski, 1985; O'Hare & Smith, 2011). So many decisions about what to keep in an archive, and how to keep the archive running in the first place, are based around what the archivists can *afford* to keep, and yet reappraising and deaccessioning are often last resorts because archivists are so afraid of upsetting their donors (Greene, 2006). Kenneth Duckett (1975) argues that 'many potential donors have very little understanding of the needs of scholarship,' and another archivist has described donors looking at her like she's a crazy person when she declines to accept their inappropriate gifts (Tate, 2008). The problem with constantly appeasing donors is that archives can too easily be swayed to shift their collection and exhibition strategies to meet the standards of those who give money or valuable materials, and so they inadvertently ignore the needs of their actual users.

Take the example of Nixon's Presidential Library: Tim Naftali, a prominent historian, was a little apprehensive when he was specifically chosen and asked in 2006 to be the next director of the Library. His nervousness centered around his previous work and what he would be getting into with the new position. He was pretty well-known at the time for ignoring common political narratives to provide unadulterated evidence about history, and so was afraid that Nixon's infamous presidency would be tough to navigate with complete impartiality (Gumbel, 2019). Naftali was right; when he took the position and began making efforts to create an exhibition that focused on the Watergate scandal, he was met with intense opposition from the Richard Nixon Foundation, a funder of the Library which was primarily run by the previous president's family, friends, and those who otherwise were more interested in presenting a clean version of Nixon than seeking historical truth. Naftali's relationship with the Foundation continued to sour as the funders kept shooting down his ideas for exhibitions and guest speakers, and the 'lowest point' was finally reached in 2009: The Foundation was insulted when Naftali invited John Dean, who had once testified against Nixon, to speak on the anniversary of the Watergate break-in, which eventually led them to cut off all funding for such programs.

Naftali's story is a prime example of how those with money can take almost complete control of a historical record and what the public ultimately gets to see, but his is not the only example. Like Nixon's Presidential Library, many repositories have similar foundations or development departments whose sole purpose is to secure more funding for the organization, and these fundraising activities are eating up more and more time and resources than ever (Browar & Streit, 2003; O'Hare & Smith, 2011). Just step into the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC and you are instantly hit with an example of what money can buy in terms of history and culture. The Sackler family 'donated $50 million worth of Asian art and artifacts to the Smithsonian, and an additional $4 million to fund a museum to hold it all' (Dafoe, 2019). Several lawsuits became widely publicized in the Spring of 2019 regarding the Sacklers' involvement in aggressive marketing tactics used to sell OxyContin, a highly addictive pain medication that is now widely attributed as the root cause

of the current opioid epidemic in the United States (McGlone, 2019). Protests broke out to remove the Sackler name from the Smithsonian's gallery and some museums completely stopped accepting donations from the family. The Smithsonian has since made an adjustment to the name of their gallery: While the gallery is legally mandated to retain the Sackler name, promotional materials will simply bear the name 'National Museum of Asian Art.' They cite their reasoning as part of a rebranding effort that has nothing to do with the protests.

How did archives earn such a reputation for allowing the wealthy and powerful to decide what the public gets to see and remember? The philanthropic endeavors of the wealthy have a long history with libraries and archives. Almost half of the Free Library of Philadelphia's fifty-four branches exist thanks to famous steel industrialist Andrew Carnegie's generosity (List of Carnegie libraries in Philadelphia, 2020). Karen Theroux (2011) describes Carnegie as 'the father of American philanthropy' but takes care to note that Carnegie was strategic about his financial support. It's also worth noting that Theroux is an editor/writer in the Carnegie Corporation's Public Affairs department, and that not everyone views Carnegie's generosity as purely for the good of the people. Jeannette Bastian (2009) fiercely argues that Carnegie donated his fortunes to educational pursuits because he wanted to reverse negative memories of him related to the Homestead Strike of 1892, when his steelworkers were locked out of the steel mills in Homestead, Pennsylvania 'in an effort to destroy the union.' The altercation became a violent tragedy, and while the event has been memorialized in a variety of media from poems to monuments, Bastian states that very few remaining records tell the story from the viewpoint of the steelworkers, and many records are completely inaccessible to the public. To give a modern-day example of power struggles vs. records retention, Matthew Connelly of the *New York Times* describes the Trump administration's common practice of destroying records, 'a clear violation of the Presidential Records Act,' in an attempt to prevent scandals à la Nixon's Watergate (2020). But Connelly also laments that such destruction is far from unique in government repositories; quite often, these operations just don't have the funds or simply don't see the need to preserve certain records.

Within this context, it's reasonable to ask how anyone could *not* see the importance of preserving records, but unfortunately many of those outside the archival field only catch glimpses of what appraisal and preservation really entail. Many assume that the work is trivial and that pretty much anyone can be trusted to maintain their own records, but this strategy usually fails. Duckett (1975) uses the example of universities: University archives are often created independently by faculty members which creates competition among the archives and other departments for materials and resources. This practice can also build tension between faculty and archivists because a professor might dump a group of records onto the archives and expect a ridiculous promise, such as restricted access specifically for that one faculty member. The strange thing about this lack of understanding around archival work is that there seems to be a trend of archives hitting the public spotlight only when they are being denounced and punished for their actions. Susan Pell (2015) points out how archives are collectively charged with "ordering knowledge, establishing criteria for credibility, and anchoring claims to authority and truth," so it's no wonder the public places so much trust in archivists to be infallibly honest and noble in their attempts to essentially preserve all of history. Because of this high level of trust placed upon archivists, the public response is often extremely harsh when an archivist does something that is perceived as a gross mishandling of our cultural heritage.

Just one example of how a misinformed journalist can publicly denounce information professionals comes from Nicholson Baker, a well-known American novelist and essayist who proclaimed in 2000 that workers at the Library of Congress were irresponsible because they were destroying newspapers. More specifically, he was angry that the librarians were choosing to microfilm their newspapers and were not preserving every single newspaper in its original format (Cox, 2000). This ties into the lack of understanding surrounding archival work; any archivist would respond to Baker's article by explaining that newspapers are difficult to store. Microfilm not only makes the information on the newspaper much more accessible, it also allows that information to last longer. A good archivist can determine which newspapers are truly unique, such as the first newspapers to display color images, and would preserve those items in their original formats. But a famous writer who has never worked in an archive probably doesn't know any of this, and this particular writer decided to use his strong public platform to criticize something that he doesn't really understand. Baker wrote a mostly erroneous article about the horrors of microfilming and destroying original newspapers, and unfortunately archivists usually lack the fame, and therefore the voice, to reach a large enough number of people to correct the public viewpoint.

Perhaps articles like Baker's are partially to blame for misunderstandings around the responsibilities of an archivist. And, not surprisingly, these misunderstandings and public outcries often lead us right back to our original topic: money. Publicly displayed backlash toward archives could create a feedback loop in which archivists are afraid to do anything that might upset the public. Sheila O'Hare and Andrew Smith assert that Baker "has done much to promote preservation and to publicize the value of libraries," but has also "fostered an atmosphere of deaccession paranoia on the part of librarians and archivists" (2011). In an attempt to avoid public scorn from what those authors describe as the "dumpster full of books scenario," archivists might be compelled to frantically save everything they possibly can. The New York Historical Society

made such a mistake and suffered serious financial consequences because they accepted every single gift they received, even if the gift was of poor quality or if there was absolutely no way the Society could afford to maintain it.

In scenarios where expectations are high and funds are low, archivists easily become overwhelmed by backlog and are forced to take drastic steps in order to raise more money for the ridiculous amount of work they've created for themselves. These frantic attempts can lead to more public backlash, such as when the University of San Francisco "aroused widespread dismay" for auctioning off a set of rare books from its library, or when the New York Public Library sold nineteen famous artworks and was accused of "damaging" their own credibility (O'Hare & Smith, 2011). Nicholson Baker of course had to provide his two cents on the matter when he wrote about the British Library selling off its American newspapers, which caused many people to accuse the Library of "betraying the public's trust" (Cox, 2000). It's pretty unfair; we want archives to preserve everything and we get angry with them for doing it wrong; we under-fund them; we might visit them but we all but ignore their requests for donations. But when archivists try to find ways to increase revenue by selling off unnecessary materials which may have been given by irresponsible donors (Terzian, 1996), we suddenly have strong opinions about how they should use their hard-earned resources.

It's no wonder that current discussions among information professionals frequently deal with archives as vehicles for those in power to maintain their status while silencing those who lack the resources to manage a repository (Pell, 2015). Fear of upsetting the public and losing money has caused archivists to change their methods and even create policies to protect themselves against (at least) upset donors who will no longer give, and (at worst) litigation (Becker, 1993). The positive side to this mess is that we are starting to see archives take more control over their collections instead of allowing themselves to be passive keepers of everything that is dropped at their doorsteps. Independent or activist archives have recently become popular and are described by Susan Pell as "spaces of empowerment and self-determination, as well as collectivized forms of knowledge production" (2015). In these grassroots-led archives, professionals take a more proactive role in seeking what they wish to preserve, or even create their own records such as interviews with members of a community.

Archives will always be strongly affected by economic ups and downs (Browar & Streit, 2003); when the market crashes, the wealthy are less likely to give. Hopefully with smaller, more specialized archives taking shape, archivists can work collaboratively within their internal departments instead of pushing agendas and fighting over resources. If fewer people are working together on one shared vision, they are freer to ignore the noise of those who don't understand the goal: those who would have archives save materials that are not within the institution's capacity to maintain or that simply do not fit the collection as a whole (Wedgeworth, 2000). The resulting archives will be more cohesive, less susceptible to pressure from money and politics, and hold collections that accurately reflect the needs of both their creators and their communities.

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