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IS 434

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**Let Me Tell You a Story:**

**Bringing People into the Archives**

**Through Storytelling Events**

In the winter of 2019, I was enrolled in Information Studies 281, “Research Methods for Graphics and Historical Illustration,” where I had the opportunity create a small exhibit. The focus of my presentation was the photography featured in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* by Charles Darwin, specifically one image of a crying child meant to demonstrate mental distress, which later became popularly known as *Ginx’s Baby*. During the course of the class, I learned about the fascinating life of the artist who created and photographed the illustration, his letters to Darwin, the challenges surrounding its creation, and the tremendous reception the picture received.

It was shockingly serendipitous when, the day before my final paper was due, I saw a banner waving from a streetlamp announcing a show of the photographer’s work at the Getty Center. I had to go. I made my way to the museum that afternoon and went directly to the exhibition. I enjoyed so many of the photographs that I had seen in my research, when finally I turned a dark corner to see *Ginx’s Baby* alone on a wall, spotlighted. After learning the stories surrounding this drawing, the impact of seeing the very piece that had been touched by the artist was overwhelming and my eyes filled with tears.

In the seminal documentary series and book *The Power of Myth*, Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell speak of the very transcendental nature of mythic stories explaining that they are “experience[s] of life.”[[1]](#footnote-2) And sharing these stories is a fundamental human activity that transcends time and culture. Libraries have long recognized this power and, as institutions replete with published source material, they have been successfully using storytelling programs for decades to bring people in and benefit the public. But storytelling need not be limited to libraries! In an archive storytelling could familiarize patrons with the repositories, encourage a sense of history, and enhance the impact of primary sources. I propose that archives should reorient their practices toward serving the public and to use storytelling events as an ideal outreach method that will bring great benefits to archives and their users.

**Telling Tales Then and Now**

We have been telling stories in one form or another as far back as our existence. Cave paintings of bison interacting from the Upper Paleolithic period visually represent a tale from millennia ago. As long as people have been communicating with each other they have relayed narratives to explain creation, natural phenomena, and even the mundane. Myths are “stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story.”[[2]](#footnote-3) The need to tell tales and pass them along from generation to generation is a “human instinct,”[[3]](#footnote-4) making storytelling one of our “primary defining characteristics as human beings.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

Libraries are a natural environment where the tradition of telling stories has continued, especially for children. Not only are libraries the primary public resource for physically accessing published stories, but education, public good, and service are part of the librarian’s core values.[[5]](#footnote-6) They have utilized the universal appeal and understandability of listening to stories to attract the public and provide an invaluable service. Oral storytelling in American public libraries is over a century old. In the early 1900s, librarians recognized that listeners of all ages responded to oral stories and used it to connect school-age children to one another, to their culture, the culture of others, and to literature and libraries.”[[6]](#footnote-7) It was also used to facilitate the transition of newly immigrated children to their new country.[[7]](#footnote-8) By 1927, there were storytelling programs in 79 percent of U.S. public libraries.[[8]](#footnote-9) Libraries and librarians have continually recognized the tangible benefits of storytelling events, such as increasing literacy, promoting reading comprehension, improving writing skills, and inspiring positive attitudes toward instruction.[[9]](#footnote-10) In the last two decades, libraries have expanded their programs to educate parents and caregivers about early literacy,[[10]](#footnote-11) target programming to support age appropriate development,[[11]](#footnote-12) and create storytelling events aimed at infants.

**Proposed Program**

The art of sharing stories in the US, in its variant formats such as open mic events, broadcasts, podcasts, etc., has surged in popularity in the last twenty years. The success of organizations such as The Moth[[12]](#footnote-13) and StoryCorps[[13]](#footnote-14) show that people want to connect through storytelling. Archives can harness the power of this connection to not only bring the public into our spaces but extend that connection to the materials in our repositories. I propose events held in the archive where two to three chosen storytellers tell or read a tale to a small manageable audience, after which the guests are invited to examine and handle selected archival materials that are relevant to those stories.

How is this different from other works created with archival items? Collection objects are already used to great effect in books, on television, and in movies and museums already spin narratives with their exhibitions. But although the surrogates we encounter in the media are used to great effect and museums are the preeminent cultural service provider, there would be a potency to experiencing the actual artifacts after listening to live storytelling that would surpass these other encounters. I think back to my own reaction at seeing *Ginx’s Baby*.

Tales hold listeners spellbound as they “captivate their audience, whose emotions can be inextricably tied to those of the story’s characters. Such an immersion is a state psychologists call ‘narrative transport.’”[[14]](#footnote-15) Studies have even demonstrated that during communication exchanges, the brains of speakers and listeners can actually mirror each other and exhibit coupled response patterns in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scans.[[15]](#footnote-16) Tactile engagement with material objects leads to new learning and meaning. “The relation between artifact and person is therefore a chance to experience a transformation, a shift in consciousness.”[[16]](#footnote-17) Interacting with archival records in this way would synergize the immersive effect of listening to a story with the sensory experience of handling the artifacts in a way that cannot be replicated in other media.

**Recalibrating Our Focus**

Storytelling is not completely foreign territory for archives. In the process of collecting, appraising, and describing records, archivists are themselves storytellers, crafting the narrative of society. Archivists have convened to tell tales of their own experiences in the field,[[17]](#footnote-18) and Tanya Zanish-Belcher even invoked the term in her 2018 Society of American Archivists (SAA) presidential address.[[18]](#footnote-19) However, storytelling continues to be an abstract concept developed to describe archival work rather than the tangible tool so successfully employed in libraries.

This may be a matter of priorities. Archives have simply not been as service oriented as other information institutions, such as libraries and museums. An SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities described the archival mission as one “to ensure the identification, preservation, and use of records of enduring value.”[[19]](#footnote-20) And while these functions are not implicitly weighted, traditionally the focus of the profession has been on the processes associated with the former two. In his 1989 article “Redefining Archival Identity: Meeting User Needs in the Information Society,” Randall C. Jimerson points out that the same task force acknowledged that ensuring use has been the lowest priority.[[20]](#footnote-21) As a profession we have had “love affairs”[[21]](#footnote-22) with the rare materials in our possession and have developed extensive theories and practices surrounding the appraisal, arrangement, preservation, and description of them, perhaps at the expense of our provision of access.

However, in the last thirty years there has been a shift. In the 1980s many institutions began to analyze their users and the use of their holdings[[22]](#footnote-23) and in 1986 Paul Conway published a framework for studying archival users[[23]](#footnote-24) that influenced subsequent literature and debate on the topic. Beyond studies and surveys, it is important for the industry to take action and work to entice users in. “No matter how precious archivists believe their unique holdings to be, if no one were to ever use them they would be worthless. Value accrues out of use or the likelihood of use.”[[24]](#footnote-25) Increasing the amount of archival effort expended on use may not just be a philosophical consideration, but an imperative. Jimerson makes the case that as a matter of survival, archives need to reorient themselves toward a more actively user-centric model “to avoid becoming irrelevant in the modern information society…”[[25]](#footnote-26)

There is no understating the value of promoting the archive. “Outreach (particularly to non-traditional users) needs to be recognized as important a function of an archival program as reference or processing.”[[26]](#footnote-27) Outreach from the archive means extending beyond our immediate familiar community to bring awareness of who we are and incite curiosity about what we have. Storytelling in the archive could accomplish this. Stories are a universally appealing art. By sharing them in the archives with illustrative collection materials, both tellers and listeners alike will have an easy point of access to the repository and connection to the collections within. It will give the non-academics and the non-researchers a reason to visit us and see what they have been missing.

**Benefit to the Public: Context and Affect**

Presenting stories in the archive imparts two benefits to users. The first is context. If in describing materials, archivists are “working with context, continually locating it, constructing it, figuring and refiguring it,”[[27]](#footnote-28) then by curating the stories, storytellers, and artifacts for the event, archivists will be actively crafting context. We are creating a way for our guests to understand the documents so that their experience in our spaces will be meaningful.

Factual narratives about specific artifacts can paint context that captures the imagination in a way that mere didactic descriptions cannot. A fictional tale can illustrate a way of thinking about the record that may not be evident or imagined before. In storytelling programs, the archivist can bring to the fore aspects about the materials that are not self-evident, and help the audience to consider “that the stories of those who are conventionally called records creators, records managers, archivists, users and so on are (shifting, intermingling) parts of bigger stories understandable only in the ever-changing broader contexts of society.”[[28]](#footnote-29) Through stories, we can offer potential emotional context as well, such as the possible desire, fear, or love that are facets of the records.

Manifesting context with such intention might be an uncomfortable position for the archivist. Story choice is a responsibility because it attaches a specific meaning to the artifacts for the audience. “For the form of narrativity – like all forms – is not merely a neutral container.”[[29]](#footnote-30) Even in a time when many accept the postmodern understanding that the archives are not simply a neutral catch-all, but a locus of intent and power, some archivists may not want to conspicuously propose any particular perspective. But “archivists are, from the beginning and always, political players,”[[30]](#footnote-31) and it is unavoidable that they inject values into all their functions. If an archivist acknowledges this and undertakes storytelling as outreach, then they can view it as an opportunity to directly engage the public in dialogue. They can choose stories with multiple viewpoints. They can highlight the underrepresented communities in their collections. They can select storytellers that have an unorthodox style. There is no limit to potential programming. “Context, in principle, is infinite…”[[31]](#footnote-32)

The second benefit to the users is affective impact. Archives reputedly hold society’s truth and evidence. But, why can’t the archive also be publicly recognized as centers of emotion and imagination? Users do not just access and cite items in the collections, they interact, react, and experience the records. Bringing storytelling inside the archive will enhance this affective impact and bring it to a public that heretofore has not understood this aspect of archival records.

While definitions can vary, affect can be understood as the “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion-that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension…”[[32]](#footnote-33) The archives are places of affect in that archival materials embody systems, events, and meanings that emerge when in relationship with the user. “Through their materials, all archives produce affects and enable affective experiences for those who encounter them.”[[33]](#footnote-34)

This impact will be greater when the archival records are paired with story because “our affective response to a situation, real or fictional, is not a response to an isolated moment, but to the entire sequence of events in which that moment is located…”[[34]](#footnote-35) When the archival items are situated in the expansive world of the narrative, the listener has a greater investment in its meaning and consequence.

This benefit might be all the more significant if the repository is a community archive, an organization where communities “make shared, autonomous decisions about what holds enduring value, shape collective memory of their own pasts and control the means through which stories about their past are constructed.”[[35]](#footnote-36) These collections combat the symbolic annihilation of these marginalized groups in traditional archives.[[36]](#footnote-37) They also combat the self-imposed silences of particular communities where parents do not discuss traumatic events with children such as survivors of the holocaust[[37]](#footnote-38) or the refugee experience[[38]](#footnote-39). Storytelling events will be a platform for further strengthening and deepening the representations of the community, while also providing a social opportunity for connection among members.

**Benefits to School-Aged Children**

The optimal audience for storytelling events is children and there are valuable benefits to telling them tales in the archive with collection artifacts. Programming for children that incorporates archival materials is not new. There are efforts to introduce the archives to school-age children as “[m]any federal, state, and local historical repositories have worked closely with schools for several years to introduce teachers and students to primary sources through repository tours, classroom presentations, publications, and other packaged materials.”[[39]](#footnote-40) However, combining the enchantment of stories with those efforts could create a more indelible imprint on the young potential users. Subjects such as social science, history and government can be better illustrated, and therefore understood, through the records because although children are supplied with the content of their textbooks and lectures, “experience is what helps lead to education and gives meaning to abstract concepts.”[[40]](#footnote-41)

Additionally, inviting children into the archive to listen to tales and handle the records will add to their multimodal literacy. Just as a person can read text, they can also read an object. This is called *artifactual literacy*[[41]](#footnote-42) and encouraging children’s curiosity, analysis, and interpretation of the primary sources will meaningfully supplement their critical thinking skills. Pairing the objects with tales will leave a lasting impression on the children that mere lecture does not. Most adults can still recall the moral lessons learned in folktales that they were told when they were young.

Combining primary sources with narratives can also help children relate with the larger world as storytelling is a common language that facilitates connection because they evokes empathy and recognition in the listeners.[[42]](#footnote-43) Sharing objects with them from other times, places, and peoples can concretized the concepts. If we can build this kind of programming as a standard into more curricula, even those of underserved communities, then perhaps the archives can more truly be a place where all feel welcome.

**Challenges**

Generating events requires a lot of institutional effort. “There will be budgetary implications and staffing structures may need to reflect more flexible working patterns so that outreach staff can meet deadlines, liaise with external agencies or work across existing hierarchies in project groups. Outreach is no easy option.”[[43]](#footnote-44) Storytelling events would be even more laborious than other more passive programs such as running a social media account or hosting an open house. In this case the repository is creating an experience. Archivists would have to select the stories, work with the storytellers, compose additional contexts for the audiences if the works are fictional, and select the relevant collection materials. In effect, the archivist is staging, producing, and directing the event.

This planning is made none the easier given that archives are simply not organized this way. The principle of arrangement by provenance is fundamental to the archival profession. Many collections are not processed down to the item-level and if they are, they are not structured for subject-based searching. Unless the archivist has an extensive comprehensive knowledge of the materials in their care, the storytelling event will either rely heavily on the popular and most commonly requested archival materials, or the archival staff will have to expend energy to seek out artifacts that are relevant to the works. By extension, although storytelling events could draw in new users, would they also give the wrong impression of how queries in the archive are researched?

The unique draw of telling stories in the archive space is the opportunity for the public to handle archival materials. While exciting in concept, this may simply be too high a risk for some institutions where “access policies…are built around ensuring security of the collection rather than explicitly providing access to it.”[[44]](#footnote-45) This is a legitimate concern as the rare treasures that we care for are often old and fragile. For some items, over-exposure to elements such as light or the acid on our skin can slowly erode their quality. The storage and handling conditions that archivists use are not arbitrary but extensively researched processes that are deemed necessary for preservation. We employ “policies and practices that serve to preserve materials, both in terms of security considerations and daily wear-and-tear. White gloves are worn with some materials; only pencils and laptop computers are allowed in reading rooms; some materials require the use of special stands and supports to be viewed; reading rooms are often monitored by closed circuit cameras to prevent theft. Access has long been seen to be the enemy and antipathy of preservation.”[[45]](#footnote-46) How comfortable are archives with the public, and even children, handling the records?

**Benefits to the Archives**

For those archives that are willing to tackle these challenges, there are great gains to be had by the repository in hosting storytelling events with archival materials. First, by selecting the items for inclusion, we are ensuring that the artifacts will actually enjoy use and renewed relevance. Certainly, we do not need to parade our most vulnerable records in our outreach, and a storytelling event need not feature the Gutenberg Bible. But there are more sturdy and stable pieces in every collection that can withstand occasional handling. Furthermore, storytelling events are best when intimate. There will not be large groups of people regularly touching the artifacts. With the archivist’s guidance and supervision, the audience will ideally also be learning about the proper methods of working with special collections items. It would be better to bring these pieces out, and let them be enjoyed by the public, rather than languish.

Storytelling events can also change the image of the archives and make them vital and exciting. Archives suffer a public relations issue in that they are often misunderstood. One common view is of the archive as elitist, imposing, and forbidden. “While libraries can be accessed by anyone in the general population, there is frequently an implication that access to an archive requires a certain veneer of professionalism.”[[46]](#footnote-47) Attached to this particular image is the opinion that archivists are “territorial, possessive of their collections, or condescending toward those seeking information.”[[47]](#footnote-48) As temples of evidentiary truth, they can be seen as fortress-like places of “rules and regulations, sites of surveillance with the need for documented permissions.”[[48]](#footnote-49) Even more worrisome is the image of the archive as ancient, unused, and thus irrelevant. “Dust is the most widespread and common feature of the set of stereotypes associated with archival repositories.”[[49]](#footnote-50) Engaging the public and sharing our materials through the universal language of stories makes us visible and accessible and demonstrates that archives are places of imagination, vitality, and fun. These are not educational programs, but social events that are shared experiences. We will raise awareness of the archive as a concept in all ages and may even inspire some to join the profession or donate.

Storytelling is already an established phenomenon in modern life. The success of podcasts, story slams, and audio books prove the viability and appeal of the format to a diverse range of people. We would be harnessing this same appeal to bring new users into our collections. Users that may not know what an archive is or have simply never known that they are welcome. “Archivists have not realized that promoting maximum appropriate use of their holdings should be a centerpiece of the archival mission.”[[50]](#footnote-51) What better way than to invite guests into spaces, offer captivating tales, and share our riches?

Finally, events such as this can be used to appeal to institutional resource allocators. Archives are increasingly put in the position of having to justify their expense and even their existence. Allocators understand the necessity of archives for legal and research resources, but the value of the archive must be made apparent.[[51]](#footnote-52) “Archivists need to focus attention on and publicize significant use of their material in order to improve support for archival programs.”[[52]](#footnote-53) While the contextual and affective benefits are meaningful, as qualitative rather than quantitative evidence, they are often not a persuasive argument for an increased budget. An event such as storytelling in the archive will produce quantifiable data. Through registration, not only will the organization expand their email lists, but they can clearly demonstrate the numbers of attending guests. They will produce promotional materials such as pictures and videos to present donors to exhibit the rewards of the outreach. Storytelling can also increase the traffic to other promotional channels of the organization as well, such as social media, another quantifiable indicator. “By showing resource allocators how they can use archival information to advantage, archivists can enhance their claim on scarce resources.”[[53]](#footnote-54) With the popularity of storytelling events, we may even attract future donors.

**Next Steps**

What am I going to do to advocate for this? (In places that I have worked?)

Will I write about it? Propose formats such as this in future places? Present about it?

Forum Friday event. How do we do this? Tangible examples?

**Benefit to the Archivist**

Let me conclude by adding that the final benefit in a project such as this is to the archivist. I believe that we join this profession with a true passion for the artifacts that we steward and that we genuinely endeavor to make them accessible. Not enough is said about the affective impact the materials have on those who care for them. It would be extremely rewarding to see the public understand what we do and make emotional connections with our collections. This would fortify our spirits and would go far in underscoring the value of our work. We have great stuff, let’s share it.

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50. Dearstyne, “What Is the Use of Archives? A Challenge for the Profession,” p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Jimerson, “Redefining Archival Identity,” p. 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Dearstyne, “What Is the Use of Archives? A Challenge for the Profession,” p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Jimerson, “Redefining Archival Identity,” p. 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)