



Guest Editorial

Libraries and Archives: Differences and Convergences

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It is a matter of immense pleasure for me to write guest editorial on the topic of archive management on the request of Dr. Warraich, Fulbright visiting scholar in the Department of Information Studies, University at Albany-SUNY. It provides a succinct discussion on the similarities and differences between libraries and archives

that are misunderstood by many information professionals.

Libraries and archives are both important institutions preserving cultural heritage. Most people probably think of them as very similar kinds of enterprises, though they may distinguish them on the basis of the kind of material in their collections. Libraries are commonly thought of as repositories for books and periodicals and as resources for bibliographical databases. Archives on the other hand are generally thought of as repositories for unpublished manuscripts and government records.

While this may be the popular view, the reality is that there are stark differences between the approaches and methodologies of these two vital institutions. Library collections are comprised of materials that have been consciously produced for cultural consumption—books of fiction, history, biography, theology as well as magazines, videos, and electronic databases. All these items exist because some person or persons set out to produce a work for others to read, learn from, use in their own work, or just enjoy.

By contrast, archives primarily consist of records—documents in any format created in the

course of carrying out an activity or function and then subsequently saved as evidence of that activity. Records are created not for cultural consumption, but because they were essential to getting the task at hand completed—in a government agency, a corporation, a nonprofit organization, or the life of an individual. Without the activity in the first place, there no records would have been created.

Whereas librarians typically acquire their collections through the orderly channels of the book trade—through publishers or other vendors—archives that serve particular institutions, such as national or state governments, accession materials directly from the creating offices. Many archival repositories also collect records from other organizations or individuals, but such collecting activity is not as straightforward as collection development in libraries.

Perhaps most significantly, however, libraries and archives differ in how they organize their materials. Libraries have well established cataloging and classification schemes to bring order to a collection of diverse publications. Archivists, on the other hand, seek to preserve the order that they encounter when records are transferred to their care. It is assumed that creators organize their records in ways that maximize their accessibility and usefulness for carrying out the work for which they were created and that we can best understand the records and the activities they document if we view them as originally arranged. Among other things, this means keeping all the records of one creator separate from the records of other creators—the archival principle of provenance, or respect des fonds. Archivists then create detailed finding aids to interpret this order for researchers who



wish to access the records.

Archival records have another vital role that distinguishes them from the books and journals in library collections. As evidence of activities, records serve an accountability purpose. Governments, businesses, and other organizations can be held accountable for misdeeds identified through the records they create. This is why recordkeeping practices should be mandated in law for governments as well as for many other kinds of organizations.

The shift to digital recordkeeping creates new challenges for archivists to maintain authenticity of records in a more fluid digital environment. It also poses challenges for the long-term preservation of these culturally significant materials. While the differences between libraries and archives outlined

here remain, the digital era has brought a greater convergence of the two professions. Librarians' concerns for preserving digital collections are closely aligned with archival concerns for maintaining authentic digital records. The traditional archival concern for capturing information about the context of records is particularly relevant in creating and tracking the descriptive metadata required for long-term preservation of digital materials, whether they are in archives or in libraries. As both archival and library collections move to digital formats, the common interests of both professions become more evident. It is important for all information professionals to understand the different perspectives of these two fields so that they can effectively collaborate in developing successful solutions to the problems of managing digital collections.