HOW ARCHIVES MAKE NEWS

JAMES BOYLAN

ABSTRACT: The author analyzed the “image” of archives and archivists in 300 news clippings dated from 1981 to 1984. Three types of stories were found: (1) those in which archives and archivists played a secondary role, (2) those in which they appeared in an arranged “pseudo-event,” and (3) those in which they were portrayed substantively. In the last group, few stories discussed serious issues; instead, they employed metaphors of accumulation and rot. Such treatment may reflect the political weakness of archivists. The article concludes that archivists should try to provide full, honest information to journalists, to create pseudo-events of legitimate interest, and to encourage stories on archival policies and social roles.

In 1983, the president of the Society of American Archivists, David B. Gracy II, declared that the focus — or the chief worry — of his time in office would be “the image and stereotype that non-archivists have of the archivist and archival.” He painted a dismaying portrait of “the image of the archivist in the public mind”:

Some think it is an image of shabby grandeur. Others think it is an image of an unessential person. Still others think there is no image at all . . . . But no archivist with whom I have talked is satisfied, or even comfortable, with the general image or stereotype carried by the public at large . . . . Indeed, our weak image is so pervasive that we can disregard it no longer.

This issue is important, he suggested, not so much as a matter of self-esteem as of necessity, for the public and public officials will not indefinitely support an enterprise and a profession that they find dispensable. 1

The business of polishing one’s image is far from simple, as Daniel J. Boorstin pointed out more than two decades ago. 2 An image may be a public identity manufactured to cover the flaws of the real person or institution or — and this may have been Gracy’s meaning — it may be a public identity created to make the world at large think of, in this case a profession, what its own practitioners in their heart of hearts would like to believe of themselves. This is not intended to be belittling, for there is a real problem. The question is whether to talk about it as an image problem.

The study presented here is designed to inquire into that part of the problem that surfaces in the newspaper press. Colleagues and archivists helped to assemble several hundred clippings. 3 These were narrowed to a selection of roughly 300 items, ranging in date from 1981 to 1984 and dealing directly with archives or archival work (rather than, for example, freedom of information
laws or public records not yet deposited in archives). This heterogenous collection of course defied quantitative approaches; instead, the method used was that of common-sense classifications, and the conclusions were of the same variety.

The first finding is of the type likely to disappoint any group unsatisfied with the coverage it receives in the press. It is, simply, that there was scant evidence that newspapers do anything unusual or discriminatory in handling news about archives and archivists. News stories about archivists are usually governed by the same routines and formulas that govern news about relatively unfamiliar professions and institutions.

These formulas are an amalgam, made up of conformity with the general standards and styles of the trade, the journalist's understanding of the employer's policies, and of political, cultural, and moral norms, usually not articulated. They all serve the function of reducing hesitation, of providing the reporter or editor with a convenient box in which to place a given item; they help the journalist judge the newsworthiness of material, and provide an appropriate treatment for it.

This sample fell (or was pushed) into three familiar formulas: those that were published primarily for their general news value, with archives and archivists serving an incidental role; those that dealt with archives and archivists but were essentially arranged publicity about particular activities; and those that dealt substantively with archives and archivists as a profession or an institution.

The first group comprised stories that involved archives but were really about something else. Their importance should not be discounted, however; much of what the public reads about archives and archivists gets into print piggyback on such stories, and the variety of such items is enormous. Here, from the sample studied, are a few ways to make news:

Conceal something: "Secrecy shrouds assassination data."
Find something: "Lost copy of 'Day of Infamy' Speech Found."
Upgrade an historical figure: "Burr didn't write 'treasonous' letter — scholar."
Downgrade an historical figure: "Freud: Secret documents reveal year of strife."

Get in a fight over a dead celebrity: "New York in race to keep Stravinsky archive."

Get in a fight with a live politician: "Nixon sues to keep 6,000 hours of tapes from public."

Be associated with a crime of any sort: "47 Soviet officials expelled by Paris on spying charges; decision by Mitterand linked to the arrest of a French archivist in case about industry secrets."

Obviously, the list is suggestive rather than comprehensive. In some of these stories, notably those dealing with scholarly findings, archivists played at least a catalytic role. But in each case the focus is on a subject other than the archives or archivist. Such stories often tell the public something about archives, but they may strike archivists as off key — for example, in the persistent emphasis on secrets and discoveries.

The second type of story — that designated as being more publicity than news — can be characterized as the product of a "pseudo-event." This is a descriptive, not an invidious term. Boorstin popularized it in his book, The Image, and it entered the language. But because it has been used and misused
so extensively, it is worthwhile recalling his original specifications. This is a condensation of his more elaborate definition:

_Pseudo-event:_ A happening planned for the primary purpose of being reported and, via self-fulfilling prophecy, enhancing the reputation of the sponsor.7

Here are a few examples, among many, of stories about archival pseudo-events:

“Special Day and Library for Margaret Chase Smith.”
“$42,000 raised for the JFK Library Fund.” (This particular event was a little more pseudo than most, in that the chief contributor was the newspaper printing the story.)
“308-year-old will to be displayed.”
“The nation’s scrapbook; on the [National] Archives’ 50th, presidential doodles and royal recipes.”8

The lack of spontaneity does not necessarily make such stories uninteresting or unworthy. Indeed, they may be the archivist’s most dependable route into print, for newspapers (and, not incidentally, television stations) often prefer announced, even staged events for their predictability and pictorial opportunities. Moreover, they are advantageous from the archivist’s point of view as well, for the source may retain a substantial degree of control not only over the raw material of the story but over its tone and framing as well.

Those two kinds of stories — the ones that involve archives in the general sweep of the news and the ones that are arranged for the benefit of archives — comprised the bulk of those in the sample. Yet they are probably less important and present a less complex problem for archivists than the minority that remained.

The residue of stories comprised news and features dealing directly with archivists, their institutions, and their work. These fell into two types. One was the policy or public-affairs story, dealing with such aspects of archives as budgets or legislation. The other was the kind of story that responded directly to the question of image. The sample did not contain many of either kind but they (and to a degree their absence) revealed something of the value that journalists — and by inference the public — place upon archives and archivists.

Considering the economic difficulties that the public sector in general, scholarly facilities specifically, and archives in particular have undergone in recent years, there were surprisingly few stories on, for example, budget cuts and their consequences or on political questions involving archives. In 300 items, only a dozen or so could be considered to throw any light at all on the public policy or expenditures for archives and records. Most strikingly, there was little attention to the then-current issue of independent-agency status for the National Archives.9 It is hard to determine whether such lack of coverage is owing to the competition of other, similar news or to a failure by the archival profession and agencies to provide the press with adequate raw materials. Or to a perception by the press, dealt with below, that it need not exert itself to cover such matters. In any case, it seemed an important deficiency.

The remnant of stories that directly characterized archivists and archives were the most revealing. Sometimes these characterizations were woven into news stories; more often, they were the work of feature writers or columnists,
who have the opportunity to expose their attitudes in ways that ordinary reporters do not.

These writers seemed to have at hand a rather narrow repertory of literary tools to describe archives. Some concentrated on sheer, stupefying bulk, on astronomical statistics: The National Archives as the repository for “3 billion paper documents, 5 million photos, 1.6 million maps and so much film you could wrap it around the world twice and have enough left over to stretch from New York to Omaha.” The Massachusetts state archives as the “Valhalla of paper. Stacks of paper, boxes of paper, rooms of paper, warehouses of paper. Twenty-five thousand cubic feet of paper . . .” 10

With the bulk comes the suggestion of decay: “The records lie crumbling in the McCormack State Office Building, to the dismay of historians.” “The next step was to scan the decaying pages of the original Boston City Directory at the state archives.” “The eight-page document, one of 350,000 painstakingly restored papers that had been rotting away in the musty basement of the Suffolk County Courthouse . . .” 11

In addition, the writers attribute to archives a monastic isolation and unearthly quiet:

Suddenly, there are more than whispers in the coffered research rooms of the National Archives, the tucked-away cloisters where . . . scholars, genealogists and Americans curious about their past sift quietly through census reports, court documents, ledgers, and other raw materials of history, has become the center of a sharp dispute that has spilled beyond the archival boxes. 12

Clearly, newspapers writers find such surroundings oppressive, and it is hard to believe that the ordinary reader would recognize in such descriptions a facility either useful to or usable by the public. Rather, the picture is of unmanageable and unmanaged skyscrapers of paper and of unsavory rot. (The dictionary says musty means the “odor and taste of substances that have spoiled in close, muggy weather; sour and fetid; moldy . . .” Is that really what was meant?)

Nor have the newspaper writers made archivists themselves any more appealing. Two relevant items, through what appears to be less coincidence than common cultural impulse, likened archivists to pack rats. (For the record, a pack rat is a Rocky Mountain rodent that hoards food and objects in big cheek pouches.) In one story, a state archivist was designated “the chief pack rat” (and the writer did him the further disservice of misspelling his name). In another, the archivist was not compared directly to a pack rat but to the Collier brothers, who were in turn identified as “those legendary New York pack rats of print in the 1940’s.” 13

Admittedly, such characterizations were the exception. More often, archivists remained faceless; one writer concluded: “As a breed, archivists resist fantasy and legend.” Even the Massachusetts state archivist was quoted as saying, “It’s hard to make records a sexy issue.” Nor, it appears, to make archivists themselves sexy. 14

In the end, it must be conceded that there is an image problem. But the remedy may not be image repair — that is, using public-relations devices to create and present a new professional facade. Boorstin properly warned that
when we use the term “we plainly confess a distinction between what we see and what is really there . . . By our very use of the term we imply that something can be done to it; the image can always be more or less successfully synthesized, doctored, repaired, refurbished, and improved . . .” Image refurbishing might temporarily make archivists feel better but would do little for the more basic problem of improving society’s understanding of their role.

In all of the news stories in the sample, the most revealing, if the most daunting, was written by David Nyhan, a political writer for The Boston Globe, in 1983. It was an account of his discussion with Dan Fenn and Bill Moss of the Kennedy Library in Boston; both archivists had been discouraged by press coverage of the release of a batch of previously secret Kennedy tapes, and especially by hints that the archivists must have “sanitized” the tapes on behalf of the Kennedy family. Fenn had appeared on ABC’s Nightline program and had tried to insist that he was not a family hireling but an independent professional; he felt that he had not succeeded. Nyhan wrote that Fenn and Moss felt that “the news media and the general public don’t understand what they’re about.” Nyhan added: “At the root of this misunderstanding is the cynicism and mistrust that journalists and the public have for just about anything run by the government.”

Such cynicism, compounded by unfamiliarity, extends of course beyond government to much of the public, nonprofit sector. America’s newspaper press rarely treats with contempt those associated with power and with powerful institutions; indeed one’s portrayal in the press can almost be considered an index of power vs. powerlessness.

The distinction between image and power emerged starkly in a poll conducted for the SAA by Social Research, Inc. That organization interviewed “resource allocators” — that is, persons who control funding for archives. The interviewees displayed surprising knowledge of archival operations and respect for archivists’ professionalism. Yet archives received comparatively low budget priorities. Here resource allocators ticked off the symptoms of powerlessness: low visibility, passivity, out-of-datedness, political impotence. These are the same stigmata that archivists have tended to identify as an “image” problem.

Such a study suggests that much of the immediate problem lies beyond the question of sympathetic portrayal in the press, and extends instead into the issue of the place of archives in their host polities and bureaucracies. Yet seeking less superficial, less uneasy stories about archives in newspapers may be worth the effort, for visibility in the press is one sign of enhanced political standing.

Despite a number of studies that purport to show the contrary, journalists for the most part share the dominant values of our culture, and will usually reflect what they feel is the dominant public view of an institution. Yet, to their credit, they combine these fairly conventional political views with a respect for knowledge that is shared by most people who make their living by words.

This duality of attitudes may mean a slow trek toward more enlightened coverage, but not an impossible one. Most journalists are not inflexible or unreasonable, although often slow to yield up their professional superficiality and skepticism. Most will respond to information and argument, once they are convinced that something of social worth is at stake.

Archivists can themselves help this situation. Rather than nursing feelings of grievance against the press for slights, misinterpretations, or inattention, they
can take simple measures that may improve coverage of all three major types of stories:

1. In news stories in which archives are involved incidentally, the reporter should be offered full and accurate information, regardless of whether the archivist, as a news source, believes that the information will reflect favorably or unfavorably on the archival institution or profession. Albert H. Whitaker, Jr., the Massachusetts state archivist, set a good example, in his co-operation with the press after a page of the Massachusetts Bay Charter was stolen, although the news cast his operation in an unfavorable light.\(^{18}\)

2. Archivists should have no reluctance to arrange pseudo-events of appropriate substance. That is, archivists should not fall into the trap of indulging in public-relations tricks (e.g., meaningless anniversaries or celebrity-flaunting) simply for the sake of being mentioned in the newspapers or on television. But the press should be supplied with plentiful information in attractive form, and it should be offered access to the institution and to relevant individuals or materials. One attractive example resulting from such effort was a story in The New York Times telling how materials in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research served as the basis for a Yiddish theater revue; another, also in the Times, was based on the presentation of the tape archives of radio station WOR to the Library of Congress.\(^{19}\)

3. Stories dealing with archives policy and the archivists’ profession are the most difficult, tedious problem. To the extent that the problem involves the press, archivists can help themselves by encouraging discussion — through talks with reporters, through letters to the editor, through public appearances — of the public policy, social, scholarly, and budgetary stake in archives. One recent example of such an effort was the creation of a panel, headed by a distinguished historian, by three national scholarly associations to report on records management and preservation in the federal government; its work received page-one treatment in the Times.\(^{20}\)

Such work demands time and distracts from what archivists regard as their real work. But if the situation is as serious as the profession itself has painted it, such effort is necessary. Moreover, it serves a second public purpose — the improvement of the press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: James Boylan is Professor of Journalism at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. This article is derived from a paper originally delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Washington, D.C., September 1984.

FOOTNOTES

1. Memorandum to regional archival associations, September 2, 1983.
2. Daniel J. Boorstin The Image or What Happened to the American Dream (New York: Atheneum, 1962.)
3. The author is indebted for assistance to John Kendall, special collections librarian at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and former president of the New England Archivists, as well as to other NEA members who submitted clippings.


9. No daily newspaper story found, for example, came close to matching the comprehensive article by Karen J. Winkler in the specialized *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 26, 1983.


17. Summary of study conducted by Sidney J. Levy and Social Research Inc. supplied by Karen Benedict, corporate archivist, Nationwide Insurance of Columbus, Ohio, whom the author thanks for editorial advice and assistance in the preparation of this article.


