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Responding to the Call of Justice

Archivists have begun to recognize the power of archives, which arises from three central sources: the archivist's authority and power to shape society's collective memory; the archivist's responsibility and control over preservation and security of records; and the archivist's role of interpretation and mediation between records and users.^[1] Having examined these sources of archives power, I believe that the archival profession should actively engage the political issues of our times. In supporting open government, public accountability, accurate remembrance of the past, and documentation of society's diversity, archivists should respond to what Nelson Mandela refers to as the call of justice. At the ceremony launching the Centre of Memory and Commemoration Project on September 21, 2004, Nelson Mandela stated, "In our view the work of archives in the South Africa of today is potentially one of the most critical contributions to restoration and reconciliation. All of us have a powerful moral obligation to the many voices and stories either marginalised or suppressed during the apartheid era."^[2]

However, if archival records can symbolize healing and reconciliation, they also can support and perpetuate oppression. Mandela reminded the audience: "Under the apartheid regime it was a common practice for the authorities to take documents from those they regarded as enemies. Sometimes they used these documents as evidence in court cases. Sometimes they used them in various forms of intimidation. Sometimes they simply destroyed them."

The new Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and Dialogue seeks to overcome the silences in the official archives, to revive and preserve the voices marginalized during the colonial and apartheid eras. "We want [the Centre] to be part of what we have called the processes of restoration and reconciliation," Mandela declared. "And, most importantly, we want it

to dedicate itself to the recovery of memories and stories suppressed by power. That is the call of justice: the call that must be the project's most important shaping influence.”[3] Mandela warns: “The history of our country is characterised by too much forgetting. A forgetting which served the powerful and dispossessed the weak. One of our challenges as we build and extend democracy is the need to ensure that our youth know where we come from, what we have done to break the shackles of oppression, and how we have pursued the journey to freedom and dignity for all. ... This is what archives are about.”[4] Mandela adds: “The struggle against apartheid can be typified as the pitting of remembering against forgetting.” “Anyone who has explored the world of archives will know that it is a treasure house, one that is full of surprises, crossing paths, dead ends, painful reminders and unanswered questions. Very often, the memories contained in archives diverge from the memories people carry with them,” he acknowledges. “That is its challenge. And its fascination. ... Engagement with archives offers both joy and pain.”[5]

As this story about Nelson Mandela demonstrates, archives express and hold numerous oppositions: memory and forgetting, suffering and hope, power and accountability, confinement and liberation, oppression and justice, conformity and diversity, silence and vocality. Archives can serve the interests of entrenched power, but they can also empower the marginalized groups in society. Since ancient times archives have been used to bolster the prestige and influence of the powerful elites in societies. Archivists have a moral professional responsibility to balance the support given to the status quo by giving equal voice to those groups that too often have been marginalized and silenced. We can see many precedents for this professional imperative. Examples of the use of records and archives to redress social wrongs and support the causes of justice and community consciousness among marginalized groups are growing more numerous. Archivists can become active agents for change, in accordance with their existing professional principles, by taking active steps to counter the biases of previous archival practices. Archives provide a basis for empowering all citizens in a democratic society. They preserve documentation that serves as an authentic record of human activity, which can corroborate or invalidate appeals to precedent and heritage. Archives thus serve as one means of holding accountable public leaders in all sectors of social interaction. If archivists—and those who provide support and authority for their work—accept the challenges and opportunities afforded by the power of records (including textual, visual, sound, and electronic media), the archival record can support the goals of democracy, open government, social justice, and diversity. Archives can meet the needs of all members of society.

The starting point for archivists responding to the call of justice is to recognize that neutrality is an illusion. However much they protest their impartiality and neutrality, archivists cannot avoid leaving their own imprint on these powerful sources of knowledge and identity. Since the emergence of “scientific history” in the nineteenth century, historians have relied on archives and other primary sources to create and buttress their interpretations of the past. Archivists have been viewed—indeed, extolled—as impartial,

neutral, objective custodians of evidence.[6] Sir Hilary Jenkinson stated the archivist's ideal of impartiality, neutrality, and passivity in 1922:

The Archivist's career is one of service. He exists in order to make other people's work possible. ... His Creed, the Sanctity of Evidence; his Task, the Conservation of every scrap of Evidence attaching to the Documents committed to his charge; his aim to provide, without prejudice or after-thought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge. ... The good Archivist is perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces.[7]

Jenkinson's appeal to nineteenth-century canons of positivism—even after exposure to the twentieth-century thinking of Einstein and Freud—seems in retrospect “a stunningly reactionary statement.”[8] Yet nearly a century later this is still the ideal held up to archivists by many of our colleagues. Even if archivists were to accept the possibility of such neutrality and passivity, do we really want to be merely handmaidens to history?

The archivist's role unavoidably engages in politics. Archives establish and reinforce power relationships in society. We cannot remain neutral or passive. In 1970 Howard Zinn, the radical historian, told an audience of archivists that the archivist's “supposed neutrality” was “a fake.” Zinn added that archival collections were “biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure.”[9] Such bias derives from the basic assumptions of archival practice. It is not conscious or deliberate. It is endemic.

Since the era of ancient Sumeria, archives have consolidated economic and political power. The vast majority of clay tablets appear to have been created to document financial and property interests. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss clearly linked written documents to power and control. “The only phenomena which, always and in all parts of the world, seems to be linked with the appearance of writing ... is the establishment of hierarchical societies, consisting of masters and slaves, and where one part of the population is made to work for the other part.”[10]

Archives, libraries, and museums have never been neutral. Throughout western history they have served the interests of the state, the church, and social elites. As library historian Matthew Battles declares, libraries have always been “a battleground for contesting ideologies.”[11] The same is true for museums and archives, indeed for any institutions responsible for the cultural heritage of societies.

Archivists who choose to respond to the cause of social justice can do so in their professional roles in selecting records for preservation, ensuring evidence and accountability, and opening the archives to diverse perspectives and multiple voices. This process begins with a commitment to accurate, reliable, authentic, and broadly conceived documentation of institutions, societal groups, and individuals.

Before entering this discussion, however, it is necessary to distinguish between the often-conflated terms *neutrality* and *objectivity*. In an extensive critique of the development of the American historical profession, Peter Novick contends that the “ideal of ‘objectivity’ ... has been the key term in defining progress in historical scholarship: moving ever closer to the objective truth about the past.”^[12] Because this “myth of objectivity” both sets an impossible goal and also precludes historians from advocating social or political causes, Novick rejects the ideal as “not just essentially contested, but essentially confused.”^[13] Only by denying the validity of objectivity can Novick justify historians’ engagement in public policy debates.

In a highly critical review of Novick’s book, Thomas Haskell argues that the central fallacy that Novick and others perpetuate is to conflate objectivity with neutrality. Haskell defends the validity of the concept of objectivity, while attempting to rid it of “unwanted connotations” such as neutrality, selflessness, and passivity. “Objectivity is not something entirely distinct from detachment, fairness, and honesty, but is the product of extending and elaborating these priceless and fundamentally ascetic virtues,” Haskell contends.^[14] Historians (and others) can be objective without forsaking engagement in discussions of values, politics, or social policy. The historian’s “primary commitment” to truth does not prohibit political advocacy, Haskell states, but it does “set intellectually responsible limits to it,” so that one cannot claim “the privilege of lying or obscuring the truth for good causes.”^[15]

Sustaining intellectual and professional principles—such as “respect for logical coherence, fidelity to evidence, detachment, candor, honesty, and the like”—must accompany any advocacy for moral or political values. These criteria provide a context within which professional debate can occur. Remaining true to professional standards of objectivity—accuracy, fairness, and honesty—does not require neutrality on important questions of societal values.

When the future of human society is at stake, neutrality is an abdication of responsibility. Amid the chaos following the Second World War—which infused fascism, concentration camps, and atomic bombs into the public consciousness—George Orwell argued, writers could not ignore politics. The daily news aroused “an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely æsthetic attitude towards life impossible.”^[16] All public activities exist within a political context.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel argues, no one has the right to abstain. “When the life or death—or simply the well-being—of a community is at stake, neutrality is criminal, for it aids and abets the oppressor and not his victim.”^[17] As Wiesel explains, “To remember is to create links between past and present, between past and future. To remember is to affirm man’s faith in humanity and to convey meaning on our fleeting endeavors. The aim of memory is to restore its dignity to justice.”^[18]

Several recent books have explored the role of archives and archivists in supporting the public interest. Archivists can perform only a limited range of actions to further the goals of social justice, diversity, accountability, and public service. They cannot achieve these goals or even make significant differences through their own efforts. With a commitment to ethical behavior and purposeful action, however, they can contribute to broader societal interests. Some progress can already be seen in the establishment of human rights archives in the United States and several other countries. Even archivists in repositories not dedicated to a social action agenda can contribute to these goals of inclusiveness, accountability, access, diversity, and social justice. It is an ethical choice that each individual can make, based on personal values, institutional constraints, and willingness to take risks.

Many archives and many archivists will not be able or willing to accept these challenges of responding to the call of justice. Some archivists will be constrained by institutional policies, by their reluctance to endanger their job security, by time constraints in the face of new initiatives, or by their own ideological or personal opposition to such concepts. There should be no stigma or criticism for archivists who do not accept these recommendations as personal or professional goals. By the same measure of tolerance, archivists who do embrace these concepts should be accepted as practitioners of a shared professional identity.

The authority that archivists exercise within their domain partakes in political power, since access to information and knowledge conveys such power. Yet it is a power often unrecognized by most members of society, who do not see or understand the role archivists play in the contested realms of power distribution and control. Although public controversies, such as the fight for control of Richard Nixon's White House tape recordings, occasionally bring documentary sources to the forefront, archivists seldom share the spotlight. However, archival records often provide a means for holding public leaders accountable and for documenting significant societal events.

There are many recent examples of archival records being used to seek social justice and to hold public leaders accountable for their actions.

- The recordkeeping proficiency of the Nazi regime provided evidence of its own atrocities;
- These Nazi records provided essential evidence for restoring Holocaust era assets to the victims and their descendants;
- The Khmer Rouge fully documented the victims of its campaign of genocide.
- In the United States the Iran-Contra scandal of the 1980s also showed the importance of records. Oliver North sought to cover up wrongdoing by shredding documents and deleting emails. But backup tapes disclosed the connections between the Reagan administration and illegal activities.
- The Enron and Arthur Andersen scandal, exposed in 2001, demonstrated the extent to which corporations would go to destroy documents relating to illegal activities. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act, passed as a result of this scandal, prescribed

specific recordkeeping requirement to document accountability and compliance with laws.

For archivists who choose to respond to the call of justice, as articulated by Nelson Mandela, there are many opportunities—some large, others small—to act on these principles. Here, briefly, are some ideas to consider:

1. Ensuring diversity in the archival record:
 - SAA Council issued this resolution in June 1999:
The Society of American Archivists is committed to integrating diversity concerns and perspectives into all aspects of its activities and into the fabric of the profession as a whole. SAA is also committed to the goal of a Society membership that reflects the broad diversity of American society. SAA believes that these commitments are essential to the effective pursuit of the archival mission “to ensure the identification, preservation, and use of the nation’s historical record.”[\[19\]](#)
 - In 2005 SAA Council identified diversity as one of the three greatest challenges for the profession— “The relevance of archives to society and the completeness of the documentary record hinge in part on the profession’s success in ensuring that its members and the holdings that they manage reflect the diversity of society as a whole.”[\[20\]](#)
2. Welcoming “the stranger” into the archives, by seeking to include previously marginalized groups in archival documentation:
 - Jeannette Bastian discovered in the Virgin Islands that, “records become ‘witnesses’ to a silent society, a community that is the subject of the records rather than their maker but one that is no less involved in their creation.” To ensure that “the voiceless population is not the silent witness but a full partner in the record-creating process,” we must recognize that “all layers of society are participants in the record-making process, and the entire community becomes the larger provenance of the records.”[\[21\]](#) Likewise, Adele Perry contends that “the absences in the colonial archive are not neutral, voluntary, or strictly literal”; they are “silences borne of and perpetuated by violence and radical inequality.”[\[22\]](#)
3. Selecting and appraising archival records based on clearly articulated criteria that are transparent to donors, researchers, and the public:
 - Terry Cook asserts, “Archivists inevitably will inject their personal values into all such activities, and thus will need to examine very consciously their choices in the archive-creating and memory-formation processes, and they will need to leave very clear records explaining their choices to posterity.”[\[23\]](#)

4. Listening for oral testimony, both by including oral sources from a variety of cultural traditions and by creating oral histories for silent or neglected groups in society:
 - Jan Vansina, an expert on African cultural practices, states, “In oral and part-oral societies, oral tradition gives intimate accounts of populations, or layers of population, that are otherwise apprehended only from outside points of view. Without oral traditions we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world, and we would not know them from the inside.”[\[24\]](#)
5. Making archival description systems sensitive to cultural diversity and to the hidden or coded values in our language and terminology:
 - Elizabeth Yakel states, “the creation of finding aids, and with it the promise or potential of access, is inherently a political act. ... Archival representation processes are neither objective nor transparent. As such, archivists need to be more conscious of the activities that structure the creation of representations, their social construction, as well as their appropriate uses.”[\[25\]](#)
6. Providing inclusive reference and access, open to all members of society freely and equally:
 - In 1993 SAA President Anne Kenney testified in US Senate hearings, “A primary goal of an archivist is to provide fair, equitable, and timely access to materials for researchers,” adding that “in relations with their donors and researchers, archivists embrace a position that supports making historical papers accessible with all due speed.”[\[26\]](#)
 - Tom Nesmith argues, “Reference is not so much about helping people to retrieve records and knowledge that already exist, or are frozen in time, but about assisting users to create them anew, by guiding users to records with contextual descriptions about how records were created (including the archival contribution to their creation) and in learning from researchers their contribution to understanding this contextuality.”[\[27\]](#)
7. Embracing new technologies, such as Web 2.0 social media tools, which seek to make information more fully democratic and interactive:
 - Archival blogger Kate Theimer states that Web 2.0 social networking media “provides many opportunities for increasing the diversity of the users of archives and exposing and empowering societal diversity.” This promotes a culture that is “open, connective, creative, participatory, and non-hierarchical” and allows people who had been marginalized by traditional approaches to archives, libraries, and museums to participate actively in the creation, preservation, and use of community memory and history.[\[28\]](#)
8. Supporting open government, public accountability, and democratic values:

- As *The Nation* stated in a 2004 editorial: “The national archivist is crucial in a democratic society: He preserves our history and makes government records available to the public. He should also serve as an advocate for greater openness.”[\[29\]](#)
 - Elsie Freeman Finch declares, “To the extent that the public understands that archives exist to be used for reasons that affect their lives, property, civic well-being, and political influence, the public will be disposed to support and encourage archives.”[\[30\]](#)
9. Public advocacy, both on behalf of archival and documentary concerns and in support of the public good. This may include becoming whistle blowers when confronted by efforts to undermine these principles or to destroy or compromise the reliability of archival sources:
- Rick Barry argues that archivists and records managers should “be in the forefront of whistleblower protection legislation,” which would provide “a needed umbrella for those among us who have the intestinal fortitude to stand up for proper recordkeeping practices when ethics and sound practices are being trashed within their own organizations.”[\[31\]](#)
 - Verne Harris became a whistle-blower when he disclosed the unauthorized destruction of records during the final days of the apartheid regime. He concluded, “There is no knowing of right without giving account to personal morality. For each of us has the right, and the obligation, to be true to ourselves.”[\[32\]](#)
10. The result of these actions will ensure the availability of archives of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Responding effectively to the challenges of using the power of archives for the public good will require a broad commitment by the archival profession to reflect on underlying assumptions and biases, and to overcome these through a renewed commitment to democratic values. There are risks involved in such changes. It will be difficult to commit archivists and their profession to a more inclusive view of social responsibilities. But the stakes are too high not to accept these challenges. Historical examples of abuses of power, control through manipulation of the archival record, and efforts to limit access to vital information show the dangers of misusing the power of archives and records. Archivists should commit themselves to preventing the archival profession’s explicit or implicit support of privileged elites and powerful rulers at the expense of the people’s rights and interests. They should commit themselves to the values of public accountability, open government, cultural diversity, and social justice. Then archivists can truly say that they are ensuring archives for all, and employing their professional skills to promote a better society. In doing so, we can use archives power to promote and help to secure memory, accountability, and social justice.

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- [1] This essay is based on the author's book, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009).
- [2] "Address by Former President Nelson Mandela at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and Commemoration Project" (September 2004), ID # NMS761, Nelson Mandela Foundation website, <http://www.nelsonmandela.org/index.php/memory/resources/speeches/> (accessed 4 October 2007).
- [3] "Address by Former President Nelson Mandela." In 2006 the Nelson Mandela Foundation recast its core business as a nongovernmental organization (NGO), renamed "The Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and Dialogue."
- [4] "Address by Former President Nelson Mandela."
- [5] *A Prisoner in the Garden*, 9.
- [6] Terry Cook, "Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory," in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, ed. Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 170.
- [7] Hilary Jenkinson, quoted in Terry Cook, "What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1989, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 23.
- [8] Elisabeth Kaplan, "'Many Paths to Partial Truths': Archives, Anthropology, and the Power of Representation," *Archival Science* 2, nos. 3-4 (2002): 215-16.
- [9] Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 20-21.
- [10] Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted in Lubar, "Information Culture and the Archival Record," 18-19.
- [11] Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (London: Random House Vintage, 2003), 82, 196.
- [12] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 1-2.
- [13] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 6.
- [14] Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 149-50. See also Haskell, "Objectivity: Perspective as Problem and Solution," *History and Theory* 43 (October 2004): 341-59.
- [15] Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality*, 155.
- [16] George Orwell, "Writers and Leviathan," *Politics and Letters* (Summer 1948), available at: <http://www.netcharles.com/orwell/essays/writers-and-leviathan.htm> (accessed 3 January 2007).
- [17] Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 151.
- [18] Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 194.
- [19] SAA Council statement on diversity, <http://www.archivists.org/statements/diversitystatement.asp> (accessed 12 May 2008).
- [20] Richard Pearce-Moses and Randall C. Jimerson, "Facing the Future: SAA's 2006-2007 Strategic Priorities," *Archival Outlook* (July/August 2006): 8-9.
- [21] Jeannette Allis Bastian, "Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizer," in *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, ed. Margaret Procter, Michael G. Cook, and Caroline Williams (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 41.
- [22] Adele Perry, "The Colonial Archive on Trial: Possession, Dispossession, and History in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 345.
- [23] Terry Cook, "Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory," in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*, ed. Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 173. See also Verne Harris, "Postmodernism and Archival Appraisal: Seven Theses," in *Archives and Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), 101-6.
- [24] Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 197-98.
- [25] Yakel, "Archival Representation": 20-25.
- [26] "Testimony of Anne R. Kenney before Senate Subcommittee on Regulation and Government Information" (unpublished typescript, June 11, 1993).

[27] Nesmith, "Reopening Archives," 266.

[28] Kate Theimer, "A Different Kind of Web: New Connections between Archives and Our Users with Web 2.0," draft book proposal submitted to Society of American Archivists Publications Board, November 2008.

[29] "The Haunted Archives" (Editorial), *The Nation*, April 15, 2004.

[30] Elsie Freeman Finch, "Introduction," in *Advocating Archives: An Introduction to Public Relations for Archivists* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1994), 1.

[31] Rick Barry, "Thinking About Accountability, Recordkeeping and Shelley Davis' *Unbridled Power*: A Commentary," (March 2001), 8 of 13, available at: www.mybestdosc.com/barry-r-on%20sdavis.html (accessed 14 May 2008).

[32] Harris, "Ethics and the Archive," 12-13.