

## **Choices and Challenges Symposium Summary**

**Chris Bensch**

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“Choices and Challenges,” the theme of this symposium, has situated us firmly in the world of mixed motivations, mutually-exclusive alternatives, and necessary compromises. This is not a symposium about establishing lofty and unachievable ideals. It’s about confronting reality. As such, I feel like we’ve channel surfed through our own specialized archive and museum version of reality programming. How do we get the necessary training to do our jobs? Of course, that’s “The Apprentice.” What about appreciating the perspectives of our colleagues, be they archivists, curators, or conservators? That happens on “Trading Spaces.” The processes of bringing deteriorated artifacts back to good condition and presentability? That’s “Extreme Makeover.” We’ve learned that the pitfalls and perils of copyright can be pretty scary, maybe even constituting the ultimate “Fear Factor” in our professions. And, finally, what do all of us and our institutions want to be? Of course—a “Survivor.”

Having immersed ourselves in these and other topics through the course of the symposium’s sessions, I’m looking for what I can distill and take away, back to my own particular reality within our profession and actually apply to my day-to-day life. For me, the symposium’s content has centered on five key questions:

- Who are we?
- What common challenges do we face?
- What key questions do we need to ask ourselves?
- What could we do better?
- And what happens next?

So who are we? First impressions aren’t necessarily the correct ones. For instance, if I based my understanding of the American public on my junk e-mail, I’d say we’re a population obsessed with our diminutive body parts, craving discount pharmaceuticals, and convinced that we’re paying too much interest on our mortgages. That being said, here are my impressions of our identities based on the past 48 hours.

To begin with, we’ve been told that archives aren’t sexy and that, overall, the public doesn’t value them all that much. Maybe a little archival Viagra might be in order to address those problems. The problem can be traced to the fact that archives have very little visibility as institutions and the public has little knowledge of what it is that archivists do. The situation only becomes more complex when we recognize that archives play numerous and, at times, contradictory roles with regard to the records and documents they hold, striving to protect them, use them, and encourage others to access them. But the nature of archives becomes a little clearer with the analogy that archives are “wholesalers,” supplying their documentary raw materials to researchers who then use those materials to create other products—genealogies, books, articles, documentaries, and the like.

By contrast, museums function more like retailers, offering a finished product—an exhibit, catalog, or program—directly to the end consumer.

If that sketches something of the essence of archives' identity, what about the identity of conservators? Typically, conservators have studied the “how” of preserving and restoring objects, but have not explored the “why” that lies behind those technical processes. Based in their scientific background, conservators have made claims about their neutrality and objectivity but, in actuality, they've often been influenced by the same cultural relativity that surrounds us all. Conservators have been absolutist in the past, stating their views dogmatically and regarding their colleagues—curators, educators, and exhibit designers—as opponents to the goal of preserving artifacts. At the same time, curators, educators, and exhibit designers need to move beyond their own limited perspectives of conservators as obstructionists, motivated by a will to stand in the way of what their colleagues want to do with objects. Both sides need to move beyond their differences to a new paradigm of joint responsibility for an object's future.

Libraries, museums, and archives all overlap as disciplines and training for new professionals could build on some of the commonalities shared among those institutions. Such collaborative training could establish an increased sense of linkage among all the practitioners in these fields. In one way or another, we are all dedicated to educating the public and in continuing to advance our own educations.

That being said, what common challenges do we face? To our benefit, an increasingly educated population has developed an appreciation for and committed its time to institutions like museums. However, that educated, computer-savvy audience has also developed rising expectations that can't be met with traditional information access and delivery methods. The public expects digital images and searchable text to be available conveniently online. Google searches and computerized indexing systems have established standards for quick and easy access to information at a very detailed level. Meanwhile, the fields of genealogy and social history have generated interest for researchers at the individual document level—or even to particular pieces of information contained within those documents—rather than the generalizations or aggregate cataloging that archives have more typically offered to their users.

Digital media hold great potential, but they also present their own particular sets of challenges. Digital copying can be considered a preservation tool, creating a duplicate of the “look” and content of a document. The copied material can be safely used for public access while the original is maintained and preserved. But all our institutions struggle with the problem of dead or dying digital formats. Rapid changes in hardware and software occur without backward and forward compatibility, creating digital dead ends that demand both intellectual and technological solutions. At the same time, digital archival material is vanishing as rapidly as it's being created—material that's much more ephemeral than the paper documents we've traditionally termed “ephemera.” As it vanishes, a vital resource for future researchers is disappearing irretrievably.

Looking for models of digital solutions, the September 11 Digital Archives stands as an example of one way to use digital resources and the Internet to create a richer, more complex, and more diverse base of historical knowledge.

One shared challenge we confront is the need to pursue our professions within the constraints of legal issues associated with copyright. We're all living in a world that is increasingly polarized into copyright protectionists—those with something to gain by ironclad protection for their investments—and copyright secessionists—those who believe the world would be better without any copyright restrictions whatsoever. As intimidating as those copyright laws and copyright holders can often be, the truth is that organizations with economic interests in copyright want us to believe that we have fewer rights than we actually do. Archives and museums have tended to be preemptive in ceding the ground of Fair Use too easily at the advice of our risk-averse institutional lawyers. And, for too long, unqualified people have been giving opinions on copyright or establishing policies regarding copyright.

Based on who we are and the challenges we face, what key questions do we need to ask ourselves? This list might make a good place to start:

- What's authentic in the digital world? Is it the information or the digital "object?" How do we know a digital artifact hasn't been altered when electronic changes are so easy to perform and so hard to trace?
- Where do rights of privacy and publicity intersect with our desire to encourage people to use our resources?
- Who's responsible for the critical issue of recruiting for diversity? AAM and SAA are logical bodies to spearhead the effort, but they need to mobilize their members if we're to truly make a difference.
- What is an object's physical or intellectual use in an archive or museum context? Is it merely admired for its physical existence or does it prove a deeper intellectual point?
- What are we aiming at in conserving an object? And how do the choices we make support that object's meaning?

Moving forward, what could we do better? In terms of personnel, our professions need to change to better represent the population at large. Only by representing that diversity will we be viewed in the future as having validity and being worthy of the public's respect. In the area of training, museum studies need to be based on reality, not just theory, and to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape we occupy. We need to use technology for distance learning within our professions, creating cost-effective and time-efficient means for expanding knowledge and raising standards.

At the core, we need to be clearer about why we have and maintain all this stuff. Accumulating collections and preserving them are not enough, in and of themselves. As institutions and individuals, we're dedicated to education and service, not just hoarding. We need to change our perspective on the interplay of objects and ideas and to understand the meaning of a particular object for our individual institutions. And who are we doing this for? It can't be merely for our own gratification or the needs of some vague, hypothetical future. We need to

focus on our customers and end users rather than carrying on with old visions of our institutions primarily as secure repositories—time capsules—where users are regarded as nuisances at best and interlopers at worst. We need to promote archives' value as resources and be less outwardly obsessed with rules and regulations.

We need to better articulate what it is that we're preserving. Is it an idea or an object? Choices in collecting and conservation affect what's preserved and we need to be more conscious and intentional about that process. For instance, the more contemporary the object, the more it tends to be ignored for collecting or preservation. We shouldn't miss the opportunities to collect the evidence of our own time and place. In the same way that our staffs need to reflect diversity, so too should our collections. Whether those collections are held by archives or museums, whether they're concrete or digital, they need to reach beyond the typical white, middle-class contributors and more accurately represent the full extent of our society. Only by doing that can we begin to overcome the inherent racism of the preserved historical record.

We need a fresh appreciation for the functions and meanings that undergird the objects we collect. Objects in use offer sensory possibilities and visceral power compared to simply being observed in a static display. Motion makes them part of a process rather than just isolated pieces of technology. On another front, we must pursue digital collections actively. The potential digital resource is huge but also particularly ephemeral. But "build it and they will come" is not enough in the digital realm any more than it is in the three-dimensional world. An online collection or exhibit needs the same advertising, publicity, and word-of-mouth to draw attention and attract contributions. At the same time, the public needs the ability to easily contribute materials online and clear navigation that permits immediate access to those materials thereafter.

In the field of conservation, we need to move toward a new pattern in which conservation choices are based on collaborative decisions between the object's custodian and the object's conservator. In the past, conservators have often exhibited a "100% or nothing" attitude, even though the real world usually doesn't operate that way. Conservators need to establish common goals with their colleagues and develop ways to move toward those goals. Dialogue should precede treatment decisions, determining how the object will be used and establishing what point in an object's history is most interesting or meaningful to capture. In maintaining and conserving an object, we need to define what values we place highest—historical value, research value, display value, use value, monetary value—because these will shape the choices that we make.

When it comes to copyright, we need to know the extent of our own rights and our users' rights. It's essential to realize that copyright is not primarily about protecting commercial interests, but about advancing public learning. Copyright restrictions are intentionally limited so that the public good can be promoted by making available the creative products generated under its protection. The limitations on the rights of copyright holders are part of copyright law, not exceptions to it. As such, it's key to recognize that Fair Use guidelines have never been enacted into law. We need a reconstitution of a centrist position on

copyright with an increased appreciation for the value of the public domain and reasonable limitations on all parties. To cultivate that environment, we need to institute disciplinary codes of best practices in using copyrighted resources as they apply to our separate fields.

We need to make smarter use of technology, not just to automate our current functions but to establish new possibilities. We should use technology and practices from our market-driven, interconnected consumer society to help us select and prioritize what gets digitized and put on line, for example. The example of online retailer Amazon demonstrates one way to use technology, cleverly gauging what its customers may want next based on what interested them previously. Amazon also allows users to review products and share their views. That model might be applied to gathering information or cataloging from users of archival materials. If that were the case, end users could become partners in preservation and access, helping share in the expense of digitization for items they value or want to utilize.

So what happens next? We should understand that collecting and preserving aren't enough in and of themselves. Our ultimate goal is to preserve meaning, not fetishize the object itself. The objects and documents we hold are dedicated to the public good, and we should place that public's interests before our own as archivists, curators, or conservators. While the goal of saving everything is unrealistic, we should weigh options and set priorities for our undertakings. Compromise is unavoidable and preferable to losing objects entirely or searching fruitlessly for absolutes. We should repopulate the center—away from extremes that would either place every object into a perfectly climate-controlled black box or that would use every object as a hands-on expendable. We should stand our ground on copyright issues and not concede to pressure, threat of litigation, or fear. And we should train ourselves to see the broad picture, representing the full extent of our society—past and present.

Why do we struggle with these choices and challenges? It's not because this is a divine calling or because we've accidentally fallen into these careers. We do it to preserve documents and objects that have meaning, and to share those items and their significance with our visitors, researchers, and other users. And we want to make wise choices so that those invaluable resources endure in institutions that can meet the challenges and ever-changing demands of the years to come.