

THE REVIEW

Historians Just Don't Get Archivists. Here's Why.

By Michael Brenes August 2, 2018



ALAMY

I occupy an unusual but not rare position: I am both an archivist and a trained historian. I write history, sometimes for [popular outlets](#), but I spend a great deal of my time working with archival collections — processing them, curating them, and teaching with them.

I am not sure where I fit among Alice Dreger's "types" of archivists (I hope I am none of them), but I understand why her [essay](#), "The Delicate Art of Dealing With Your Archivist," struck a nerve with some of my colleagues.

While tongue-in-cheek, and riddled with both humor and hyperbole, the piece resuscitated caricatures of archivists and librarians — and yes, there is a difference between the two — that caused a heated, near visceral [backlash](#) within the profession. Librarians and archivists accused Dreger of being offensive and demeaning. As a new archivist and friend said to me: “Why a historian would — even in ‘good fun’ — malign an entire profession that makes her own work possible is completely baffling to me.”

Dreger is not alone among historians in misunderstanding archivists, and, in fact, the misunderstanding goes both ways. Transformations within the archival and historical professions in the past 30 years have prevented cross-fertilization and collaboration.

Indeed, the premise of her essay — that archivists have the “stuff”; historians need to find a way to get it — is flawed.

Professionalization has broken bonds between historians and archivists that foster understanding.

As a researcher, I used to think that way. But once I became part of the archival community, I realized that few archivists want to be gatekeepers. With all due respect to the archivist in Dreger’s essay who held on to Renaissance texts, it does little good for archivists to let materials in their collections languish on storage shelves. Researchers’ use of archival materials justifies and validates archivists’ work. Indeed, the Society of American Archivists [states](#) among its “Core Values” that archivists’ fundamental purpose is “to promote and provide the widest possible accessibility of materials.”

Of course the archivists who interact with visiting researchers are only a subset of the profession. Many archivists do “invisible work” behind the scenes. Metadata archivists ensure that finding aids and descriptive standards are accurate for researchers (so they know where to find what they are looking for in collections); digital archivists ensure that “born digital” material is transferred to online archives for future researchers; archivists in public services work every day to make boxes of archival material available to patrons when they need it, and ensure that reading rooms are secure and comfortable spaces in which to conduct research.

There are also a host of “project archivists” — librarianship’s equivalent of a postdoctoral fellowship — that have one, two, or three-year positions that end when the collection or

collections the archivist is working on are completed. Many project archivists will have little or no interaction with the public; they will not be able to communicate their expertise to the scholars that take advantage of their time, training, and education. They do not get the opportunity to be “mensches,” in Dreger’s terms.

The “invisibility” of the archival community to certain scholars is partly a consequence of the institutional and economic factors that have caused a professional separation between archivists and historians, one that has only increased in recent years. Until the 1960s, archivists were historians, and vice versa. But as Francis Blouin (an archivist) and William G. Rosenberg (a historian) [argue](#), new directions in historical inquiry and technical training in the past 40 years have created “distance between the work, training, and outlooks of historians and archivists” — an “archival divide.” In short, historians are not trained to understand the work archivists do, and archivists can leave a graduate program not conducting, or knowing, the research required by historians and what it entails.

Professionalization has therefore broken bonds between historians and archivists that foster interdisciplinary understanding of the common interests between the two professions. This cleavage is evident in multiple forms — in the separate conferences, academic journals, and associations occupied by historians and archivists.

But the separations between faculty and librarians will dissipate. The collapse of the academic job market — particularly [in fields like history](#) — has propelled more Ph.D.s into the “alt-ac” profession of archiving, and archivists are increasingly seen as professionals in the growing field of public history. In 10 years, visitors to reading rooms are unlikely to see Dreger’s “bureaucrat,” but a recent M.L.S. or Ph.D. graduate who is writing her first book, publishing in archival and/or historical journals, and teaching with primary resources — in addition to having “traditional” responsibilities as an archivist. In fact, this is already [happening](#).

Indeed, archivists and historians must continue to work toward common interests with an understanding of the demands of each profession. Archivists — including those like myself, who are also scholars — should remember that faculty members have many demands on their time. Having taught in academe for many years, I know that faculty members are overworked, teaching high course loads, serving on committees, writing letters of recommendation, and still pressured to finish their research so they can publish.

Conversely, researchers must realize that many libraries and repositories have backlogs, and that

the plethora of documentation — often, increasingly, in digital form — means archivists do not always have the privilege to master the fine details of every collection. Archivists have vast expertise and knowledge, but because of time and resources, that knowledge is not infinite.

Realizing the limitations, and stresses, among archivists and historians will foster mutual respect and empathy between the two professions — and opportunities to bridge the divide. I maintain that this can be done in the classroom; and if not in the classroom, in creating exhibitions and examples of public history where archivists play important roles. Many archivists are also [public historians](#), [teachers](#), and [scholars](#), and collaborate with historians in teaching students how history is made, preserved, and perpetuated. Archivists should be seen — and should increasingly see themselves — in this light.

There are also opportunities for partnerships between historians and archivists on issues related to the future of writing history. How do we document history in a digital age? What will be the challenges to writing history as many libraries and archives face limited funding — and are therefore unable or unwilling to accept digital material?

But only by engaging in a productive, meaningful dialogue can archivists and historians continue to work together.

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