Deciding Not to Build the Wall: Research and the Archival Profession

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If we look at professions such as librarianship and social work, it is relatively easy to identify both similarities and differences, particularly in a North American context. One similarity is that each has an explicit and often repeated commitment to the production of research. Association journals, editorials, research agendas, meetings, and so on, all constantly exhort librarians, for example, to "do research." That such a need is so clearly recognized is not surprising, since one of the factors that allows a field or discipline to be identified as a separate profession *is* research. Virtually no one ever advances the argument that research is not a "good" thing, or at least they do not do so in print.

Unfortunately, these professions share another, and markedly less attractive characteristic related to research. Whatever the officially stated and promoted goals and objectives of the professions, there is *in practice* a clear division between those members who do research and those who do not, and generally this is the same line that separates the practitioner from the academic educator. With noteworthy individual exceptions, most research (at least whatever the field chooses to recognize as "real" research) is carried out by academics, not by practitioners working in the field. All sorts of reasons have been put forward to explain this phenomenon. Among the most important is the rationale that in many fields, because of the manner in which a profession's educational programmes are organized, the whole question of how to design, carry out and even use research, is not emphasized until the students reach the doctoral level. This is combined with the general trend that individuals with professional doctoral degrees are largely steered towards an academic career, rather than towards practice. A closely related factor is that because of how higher education itself is structured, an individual who becomes a university faculty member has to publish (in other words, perform activities that meet the university's definition of research) or perish, no matter what his/her personal preferences or talents might be. The result very often is educators who are expected and required to do research, but who, in fact, may not be particularly interested in doing so, combined with a large body of practitioners who might be interested in pursuing research, but are not provided with the requisite educational preparation.

In librarianship, for example, several recent studies have shown that, except for a small group of highly motivated individuals, research production by academic educators all but ceases once tenure is achieved. Since most practitioners are given very

little institutional motivation to produce research, suffer from the lack of incentives, and discern very few (if any) practical benefits accruing to either themselves or their libraries, it is definitely not surprising that so few choose to engage in research. After all is said and done, it comes down to the fact that hardly *any* research is being done by anybody. A recent study found that in the USA, with a "professional" library practitioner population of about 153,000 and approximately 700 graduate degree programme educators, there are fewer than 300 individuals in the entire profession who are actively pursuing sustained research.[1]

Is this really so bad? Should anybody, particularly practitioners, care, other than in a disinterested, philosophical sense? After all, at the very least it seems that the research that is being done is being carried out by those who are best equipped to do so, even if they may not be very enthusiastic about it. Listening hard, you can just make out the practitioners whispering to each other, "Let the educators live in their ivory towers and do their research, just so they leave the real world to us. It makes them happy and it doesn't hurt us." And on the other side of the field you notice the academics taking a sometimes thinly disguised elitist pride in their understanding of the "big picture," and not being weighed down by concern for the individual trees in the forest. "After all," everybody finally whispers in unison, "it's been this way for years and it seems to work okay. Why should we tinker with success?"

But can this truly be called success? Yes, it does seem to work, in that some research is done — at least enough for most members of the profession as they peruse their journals, getting the impression that, research-wise, things seem to be moving along just fine. They probably do not read most of these articles because they are full of unknown methodological jargon and some fairly formidable-looking tables. And even if they do read them, they probably finish with a general observation, "that's rather interesting, but it doesn't have anything to do with *my* job." Professional reading out of the way, they go on to other things, secure in the knowledge that although they may not actually use research, much less actually do it, or even know anybody who does it, somebody out there at least is carrying the professional research torch.

It does not take much reflection to see the problem here. The whole thing has become a game. The vast majority of the players feel no real connection to their profession's research. It is an item on a checklist of things that are requrired of a profession, and as long as somebody can check it off, that is acceptable. It has no actual linkage to the reality of how the vast majority of the profession's members spend their working lives. It has no relevance. It has no impact. And in a professional field, if the majority of research has no real likelihood of having any measurable impact on the practice of that field, then it gets harder and harder to justify the effort, much less take any pride or sense of accomplishment from the process.

The result is that, as professions such as librarianship have developed over the years and have adopted more and more formalized educational paraphernalia, they have all tended to split into what can be referred to as two cultures (with apologies to the late C.P. Snow). It is an old cliche: those that do and those that teach and do research, each of which have colonized separate areas of the profession's domain. And in between they have built a wall — a big, thick, ugly wall full of dents from the occasional rocks they throw at each other. Practitioners live on one side, educators/academics live on the other, and the students have the rather challenging job of balancing on the top until they

either fall off or decide which side to live on. Occasionally the two sides shout at each other, and there are always those hardy souls who take up rock-climbing and manage to maintain homes on both sides, but the cultures remain largely separate. The thickness and the solidity of the research wall varies from profession to profession, but it is almost always there. Once there, it can be all but impossible to break down. Library educators and practitioners have spent enormous amounts of time and effort bemoaning the lack of participation in the research process by practitioners, and the general lack of interest in applying the results of what research has been done to the reality of the workplace. Everyone sees the wall, dislikes the wall, wants to tear down the wall, but year by year it just seems to become higher and higher.

How did this sorry approach to the role and production of research in some professions get started in the first place? How did the first few bricks in that wall get placed? As often happens, while the question is simple enough, the answer is anything but simple. One important factor is the role of professional education. Over the last century, but particularly in recent decades, professions such as librarianship have tended to formalize their educational requirements, emphasis being at the graduate level. Frequently this is combined with an explicit attempt to adopt a paradigm of inquiry so prized by academe, known in general terms as the "deductive scientific model." At a very basic level, this approach adopts the premise that the ultimate research goal for a field or discipline is the development and elucidation of theory. The idea here is that once theories are developed, their validity can be judged by systematically deriving and testing hypotheses dealing with specific problems. If the results of a test support the theory, then the validity of the theory is demonstrated. If the test results do not support the theory, then further investigation is carried out in an attempt to evaluate the theory's validity. Theory then, within the framework of an essentially deductive system, precedes testing and investigation of specific problems. This is the basic deductive method, and it works. In fact, it works superbly for such fields as chemistry and physics. Unfortunately, bitter experience has shown that in practice the "pure" deductive model often works much less well for social science professional fields such as librarianship. The problems caused by the strict application of the model to these applied scientific fields or professions are both numerous and complex.

One of the basic problems facing the discipline of librarianship, for example, is the premise that in order for it to be a "real" field there must be a clearly and explicitly defined body of theory capable of being empirically tested. Without this "critical mass" of theory the legitimacy of librarianship as a separate discipline and profession can seem excessively vulnerable. This in turn can lead to direct and very real threats to the position, or even the existence, of graduate library science education programmes in universities. If, as some writers charge, librarianship along with several other so-called "information professions" does not have a true theoretical foundation, then can it legitimately lay claim to being a separate field or discipline? If librarianship cannot stake out a domain of knowledge that clearly sets it apart from other disciplines, and further express that domain as a set of carefully defined principles or theories, does it really exist at all, except as an artificial construction put together over time by well-intentioned but ultimately misguided people? Is it not, rather, a collection of useful applied techniques that bring definite benefits to society, but does not qualify as a true discipline? This is not just a subject for debate at dry and dusty professional meetings. It lies at the very heart of what librarianship, and thus librarians, are all about.

How does this relate to the development of the two cultures, each living on separate sides of the research wall? The largely unconscious, or at least unspoken, reaction of those most immediately threatened by charges of being part of a "field" lacking in substantial amounts of basic theory has been essentially to say, "Well, by heaven, *we* know we are a separate discipline, but if we need more theory to prove it to others, then let's go get some." Remember, however, that to fit the traditional definitions, theory needs to be all-inclusive. It has to be broad enough to account for all possible variations in the area under study. It does not, for example, speak directly to how long the circulation periods should be in a particular public library. Furthermore, the basic deductive model implies that legitimate "domain building" research should be done in the form of testing specific hypotheses based on an overall deductive system of theory that includes, for example, the specific aspect called circulation periods.

The practical result all too often has been for fields to begin building that wall between the two professional cultures. While they were probably initially attracted to the profession by the practitioner side of the culture, educators find themselves continually pressured to conform to the traditional models of higher education and academe. Increasingly, this means the acquisition of a doctoral degree as the minimum ticket for admission to graduate faculties. In turn, these budding academics are encouraged, particularly in terms of their doctoral research (which is the only research most of them ever do) to concentrate their research efforts on problems which have the highest probability of generating the most desirable theory. In practice this very often results in research projects that may have only the most tenuous contact, if any at all, with what the majority of the field recognizes as the "real world." Quite predictably, practitioners tend to be completely uninterested and unimpressed with "research" that appears to have virtually no chance of helping them as professionals in the workplace. They feel that most of this research might just as well have been done on Mars, for all the impact it is likely to have on them or their institutions.

Along the way some individuals have fought this trend and managed to design and carry out high quality research that has resulted in direct contributions to both applied theory and practice. Unfortunately, these people tend to be the exception; the wall between researcher and practitioner goes up, brick by brick. Practitioners who show any interest in performing "research" which has a reasonable potential for useful impact in their libraries tend to be largely ignored or patronized by "real researchers." Such little studies are "nice," whisper the real researchers, "but they are too small, too particularized, and they are not generated as a means of investigating theory." Add to this the all too common situation of practitioners, as they attempt to read and understand the often poorly-written and jargon-filled research literature, continually being given the implicit message that they are not "sophisticated enough" to understand, much less undertake, *real* research.

So as a group, librarians do not do research. Of course, some continue to evaluate their own libraries using fairly rigorous methods and designs. These methods may in fact produce quite valid results, which when applied by the practitioners lead directly to both improved performance of their libraries and a more broadly based understanding of how libraries in general work; but nobody else knows about these often very useful studies. When asked why they do not publish the results more often, practitioners tend to be surprised. It never occurs to them to consider their work as *research*. After all, it is designed to help them answer specific problems in their particular libraries: it is too

mundane to qualify as research. The wonder is not that the wall between researchers and practitioners is there, but that it is not twice as high as it is.

So goes the sad refrain about the current state of the research wall between practitioners and research/academics in library science — but what does it have to do with archives and archivists? Archival science is not a new field, any more than librarianship. It has a long and honourable history all over the world. However, in North America, thanks in large part to the general lack of the highly formalized and particularized graduate educational requirements found in librarianship, archival science has not yet managed to build that wall between the two cultures. The major writers, thinkers, leaders *and* researchers in the field have tended to be practitioners who have also contributed substantially to the education of members of the profession. Those few individuals who have been living mostly on the academic side of the profession have maintained excellent connections with both practitioners as a group and the microcosm of the workplace.

This is all to the good, yet archival science is approaching a crossroads. Based on the success of graduate archival degree programmes such as the one at the University of British Columbia, it would seem likely that in future more and more of the individuals entering the archival profession will be doing so after having attained an advanced degree specifically in archival science. Inevitably, with enlarged opportunities for formal education there will be a growing number of individuals entering the academic side of the profession on a full-time basis. It also seems likely that these educators will be placed under the same kinds of academe-related pressures and stresses as have been seen in such contiguous professional fields as librarianship.

As this process takes place, it would be a great mistake to let the wall between practitioners and educators be built brick by brick over the next few decades. Instead, archivists have a tremendous opportunity to adopt a different model of how their profession will continue to develop and function in the future. Such a model would necessarily extend across all aspects of the profession, but would be particularly important as regards research. Its basic premise is that practitioners and academics, whatever their individual backgrounds, should (indeed must) be equal partners in shaping the future of *all* aspects of the profession.

This approach is based on the concept that, rather than attempting to adopt exclusively the traditional social science deductive model, all members of the archival profession should develop an explicit commitment to the continued development of the discipline that recognizes the potential legitimate contributions which *both* research on theoretical topics and highly applied local research can make. This would mean that so-called "basic" or "pure" research, closely linked to the development and understanding of general theory, definitely would continue to be carried out, probably by academics, but certainly not only by them. At the same time both practitioners and educators, but particularly practitioners, would be encouraged and supported in research efforts designed to "build" the field from an applied orientation, using an essentially inductive approach.

"Sounds great if the world were perfect," whisper the naysayers, "but the fact is that most archival practitioners just don't have the knowledge to plunge in and start doing research. Let's wait a few years [decades], then maybe things will be different and we can think about it again." Such an argument sounds so reasonable. It would certainly be

simpler and a lot less difficult for today's archivists, but it means that the wall of separation will be up with ivy growing all over it before anyone sees what is happening, and then it will be too late. The application of the inductive model to research in library science is currently gaining considerable support, but it remains to be seen whether it will have any real impact on dismantling the wall dividing practice from research.

Archivists tend to be bright, creative and inquiring people who have a lifelong commitment to developing all aspects of their professional lives. While learning how to perform valid and reliable research is clearly not an overnight process, it is entirely within the reach of anyone who can handle the myriads of complex aspects of archival practice. This is particularly true if the research is closely tied to the familiar environments of local organizations. Currently practising archivists, as well as those coming out of the graduate education programmes, can be taught the many different research methodologies that may be successfully applied in archival situations, including both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The goal is not for every single archivist to be constantly doing research. Rather, the idea is greatly to enlarge the overall numbers of individuals who possess the requisite knowledge, motivation and interest in both doing research and applying the research results of others.

Just as important as practitioners knowing how to do research is a sustained commitment by archival institutions and professional organizations to provide both the necessary resources to carry out the studies effectively, and a well-developed means of disseminating the results through the profession. Research, if it is to be an integral part of practice, cannot be viewed as the personal responsibility of the individual archivist, somehow separate from the day-to-day world of archives. Without dissemination aimed at the profession as a whole, but particularly at practitioners, the results remain hidden away and are very unlikely to make any significant contributions to archival science.

Archivists are competent people who spend a great deal of their professional lives managing and administering the records of highly complex organizations in both the public and private sectors. Most professional decisions are made on the basis of experience, information at hand, evaluation of the current situation and intuition. A substantial body of reliable and valid in-house applied research done at many different institutions would give archival administrators considerably more high-quality information on which to base their decisions. True, because of variations among institutions, some results might not be directly transferable, but managers do not make decisions on the basis of perfect information. Instead they make them on the basis of whatever information they have on hand. If the results of a well-done localized research project are carefully reported and disseminated, an administrator or archivist in another similar organization can take the study, read it, identify similarities and differences, take what is relevant and use it to make the required decision. This is precisely how many professions do *not* use the results of research, but it is also an example of precisely *how* research can make a direct and valuable contribution to the development of a profession.

What of the theoreticians and academics, who are left muttering that all this may conceivably help to create more effective archival institutions, but it is not going to do anything to help build and strengthen the formal theoretical foundations of the profession? This is not a trivial concern. At least one major library education programme has recently been subjected, to the dismay of the entire profession, to the

judgement by its university administration that librarianship as a field does not possess "true" theory, resulting in the dissolution of the programme, irrespective of a century-long record of producing outstanding members of the library profession. Academic archivists will be under considerable pressure to conform to the traditional academic model, at the heart of which is the premise that the ultimate purpose of research is to generate theory.

The answer is not to ignore the importance of this paradigm as an effective means of developing a discipline. Rather, both sides of the profession, practitioner and academic, need to emphasize and demonstrate effectively the advantages to the field as a whole of utilizing a *combined* deductive and inductive approach. Academics will support the localized and particularized studies of individual problems in specific institutions, as a means of building the profession and developing theory in an inductive manner. Practitioners in turn, with their newly acquired knowledge of the purpose and techniques of research, will be better able to understand and support the more indirect benefits of "pure" research. Even more importantly, both practitioners and academics will actively seek out opportunities to work together on research projects, using whatever combination of method and design is most appropriate to the problem at hand.

The shift required to bring the entire profession into the research process will not be easy, but this is the key moment when it would be most easily accomplished for archival science. It will not be easy. There will be both successes and failures, but in the end the profession will grow and prosper, and the wall never shall be built.

Notes

1 Charles R. McClure and Ann Bishop, "The Status of Research in Library/Information Science: Guarded Optimism," *College and Research Libraries*, 50, no. 2 (March 1989), p. 137.