

NETWORKS IN THE EIGHTIES

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1. Network Advocacy Functions

Much was written in the prepared papers and said during our Madison discussions about how to collect materials and how to encourage their use. We have discussed these matters from the perspectives of individual network members and, to a lesser degree, from the viewpoint of the network as a whole. In their comments, nearly all program participants have lamented the scarcity of resources to carry out these collecting and service activities. Little has been written or said, however, about networks, network archivists and network beneficiaries as potential advocates for the resources needed for network operation. This is rather surprising, since networks are believed to have developed in the more activist-populist states, because many network repositories have worked so hard to build ties to a diverse grass roots constituency, and because most network programs receive their support chiefly from tax-generated state resources.

Perhaps, however, network archivists conceive of their responsibilities as exclusively service-directed. This conception might be the result of having to work so hard to acquire materials and to find users who might, in Tim Ericson's words, "turn to mush" over our records. We do not sense that our services both to those whose records we administer and those who use these records might also imply on their part an obligation—or at least good will—that can be drawn on to help obtain the resources needed to provide these services.

Resource distribution, as we all know, is often decided upon and reflected in the budget process. And in public institutions this process is usually not an entirely closed one or even very mysterious. A point of potential influence appears during the state government's legislative consideration of the budgets of the central network agency and of the institutions in which the individual

network repositories are located. Yet in my conversations with staff of several central state network agencies, I found not a single instance in which financial support of the network appears as an identifiable line item in a budget presented to the legislature. Similarly, support for the individual network repository programs does not seem to appear as a readily identifiable item in the budgets of their parent institutions. Although in difficult financial times we need to keep in mind that readily identifiable resources may be more vulnerable to reduction, public programs cannot expect to achieve a satisfactory level of support by hiding their needs from the public eye. There is wisdom in a support strategy that does not place all of the eggs in one basket—in this instance, in one very visible budget category. But just as clearly, supporters for network programs need to be able to communicate their interest by referring to specific budget items, and networks and their members need the opportunity to present network-specific requests and justifications for resources needed to operate network programs. Identifiable budget items are useful not only in reference to budgets considered by the state legislature, but also by providing the opportunity for advocacy by network archivists and network program supporters within the network agencies themselves. Advocacy, of course, need not be confined to the formal budget process but can also be important in decisions on such matters as the allocation of space, the selection of equipment, participation in an automated network, and in other areas of interest to the network and its supporters.

Networks serve a broad constituency. This often includes elected and appointed officials of local government as well as other elements of the local “establishment”—presumably those most interested in “their own” history. Is it not appropriate that these beneficiaries of network programs inform key decision makers of their interest in the further development of the network repository and, presumably, the network as a whole? If we are providing real services, there ought to be such support to draw upon. Public policy decisions should be better when information about the need for resources comes not just from providers, but also from program beneficiaries.

Archival networks won't reach their potential in the 1980s unless archivists in networks, working closely with colleagues and

constituents, put considerably more active effort into influencing the distribution of resources more favorably toward network development. Acceptable levels of support are unlikely to result merely from our providing the best possible services within the limits of resources allocated to us. To spend countless hours seeking innovations that make more effective use of existing resources and little or no time on traditional methods to increase these resources may seem more professional but might work out to be just the opposite. Networks offer great opportunities in this effort because of possibilities for coordination and cooperation within the network and because of their potential for strong, broad-based external support. This potential will become real only if it is implemented.

2. Cost Benefit Analyses

Resource distribution for archival networks can also be favorably influenced in the 1980s through better cost-benefit analysis by network managers and archivists. We need more hard figures to use in our presentations to higher level administrators as we defend and seek to expand our programs and also as we try to administer them most efficiently. Some of the areas that come to mind include: (a) A comparison of the total number of users prior to the beginning of the network with the present total, and changes in the composition of users and their use of records. (b) Comparisons on space costs (for storage, work space, research space) between network facilities and a central facility—including the estimated cost of expansion of a central facility to meet the expanded accessions, staff and users facilitated through the network. (c) Comparisons of staffing costs between a central facility and a network system. (d) Estimates of user benefits derived from access to materials in a nearby network repository compared to use in a more remote central repository or a less professionally administered repository.

I'm certain that there are many other cost-benefit studies that could strengthen the justification for a local network program and for a network overall. The design of a statistical base for such analysis should be one of the early procedural matters addressed by a new network. A practical how-to-do-it pamphlet or manual on this subject might be a very timely undertaking useful to networks

in particular and perhaps suggestive to other types of repositories as well.

3. Specialists and Generalists

The good network archivist in the eighties, as in the seventies, will have to be a good "general practitioner" in order to deal with the diverse materials and users encountered in day-to-day repository work. I've been surprised, however, to see little indication that more specialized archival expertise is fostered or shared within networks, or used in group decision making. There may be considerably greater benefits in the eighties than we have derived in the past from a conscious emphasis on specialized staff expertise within a network. Some of this undoubtedly takes place just as a result of our individual professional interests and our willingness to help our colleagues, but this could be taken much further. Consider, for example, a network of eight repositories in which each repository agreed to specialize for the time being in one or two technical areas in which the network overall requires knowledgeable assistance. Automation, conservation, specialized appraisal or description, machine readable records, oral history transcription, and corporate fund raising are just a few such areas. Such advanced knowledge, once developed, could be shared within a network in a variety of ways including assistance by phone and through personal visits, training sessions, drafting of policy and procedural materials, and preparation of grant and other funding requests.

What is suggested here is that the entire network be looked upon as a source of expertise and technical assistance rather than looking chiefly or exclusively to the network coordinating agency for such assistance—or, worst of all, feeling we are each on our own. Coordination of archival specialization in networks, in combination with the stronger collective decision making that networks permit, should make for stronger programs than would be possible outside of a network system. An alternative to the coordinated and shared assistance suggested above is, of course, to strengthen greatly the resources of the central network coordinating agency itself to provide these technical assistance functions. Some combination of these approaches seems most likely to emerge as most economical and effective.

4. Service Centers

Some archival and archives-related functions can probably be performed most effectively and efficiently if carried out in a central facility such as a non-profit service center. I say probably because we have relatively little experience and few feasibility studies on such arrangements. Potential service center activities include, for example, services in conservation, microform, archival publication, automation, short term advanced training, technical assistance, even arrangement and description of selected materials. Networks may be able to play an important part in the development and use of such centralized services in the 1980s, and some of these might be provided by the network itself, both internally and to other users. But such service centers don't necessarily need to be located in or confined to the network. Service centers could be based on several networks or could make their services available to the network on a special basis but also serve others as well. In using cooperation as a strategy as suggested by John Fleckner and Jerry Ham, we don't want the network construct to become a limiting one. Networks, because of their collective resources and needs, can play a leadership role in fostering more highly rationalized ways to meet needs shared by many archival programs.

5. Networks and Other Archival Systems

The 1980s may be an opportune time to initiate cooperative archives and records programs other than the type of state networks that were the primary focus of the Madison conference. Again, the search for cost efficient programs is likely to be the driving force in such cooperative program development. Archival affairs generally will be strengthened by such systems, and networks ought to promote it by sharing their experience with others. Cooperative archives and records systems seem especially feasible among sets of institutions which already have established working relationships and which create some or all of the records which need attention. Examples that come to mind include existing consortia of institutions of higher education such as the Associated Colleges of the Midwest, or the United Negro College Fund member cooperatives in Alabama, Georgia, and Texas.

Other potential systems include shared programs among museums, health service organizations, churches, labor unions, and a variety of other types of non-profit organizations. Networks can't do everything; they should view other systems not as rivals but as partners in the common effort to meet society's archival needs. Formal cooperation might develop between networks and other archival and records systems to their mutual benefit, perhaps through the joint sponsorship of service centers or other devices to meet common needs.

Networks, because of their collective resources—personnel, visibility, experience, etc.—can provide leadership and initiative in archival affairs beyond the formal roles they or others have set for themselves. Collective experience, collective judgment, and collective resources at least suggest a collective responsibility to reflect on broad problems and act to meet broad needs. Cooperation with other archival systems may be one such action. Advocacy in archival affairs generally may be another. Undertaking and sharing the results of technical/procedural/conceptual research and development projects might be still another area within the capacity of some networks rather than individual repositories. Networks have the potential, because of their more substantial base, to act with more legitimacy and impact in such areas. We can hope that in the eighties networks will begin to realize this broader potential.

6. State Needs Assessment & Reporting Projects

I cannot end a set of comments full of words like advocacy, analysis, cooperation, service centers, and archival systems without also noting the NHPRC grants for statewide archival and records needs assessment. These projects, to begin in twenty-eight states in early 1982,* are to undertake fact-finding, analysis, discussion, and recommendations in four areas. These include state government records, local government records, historical records repositories, and functions and services of statewide importance. While all four areas raise issues with implications for networking, the fourth area involves explicit review of matters in which cooperation seems

* The Commission hopes to be able to support similar efforts in the remaining states if FY82 funds are available.

essential. These areas include conservation services, technical assistance, education and training, an information system on repositories and their holdings, statewide planning, archival advocacy, and so on. Several states have included creation of a network among the topics for exploration in this broad fourth assessment area. The Commission hopes that results of the Madison networks conference will be useful in states that have not thoroughly considered networking in the past and also that the overall assessment and reporting projects will be useful to networking states in fostering a reassessment of ways to best meet their archives and records needs. Continued reexamination of means and ends should enable us to better meet the challenges of the future.