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Chapter 20: Archives as a Service: From Archivist as Producer and Provider to Archivist as Facilitator and Enabler
 by Trevor Owens

"Connect with customers" and "continuously improve customer service." This is the second of four goals in the US National Archives and Records Administration's (NARA) Strategic Plan for 2014 through 2018.[i] Service is one of our key values as archivists, but what is the nature of that service? Customer service? Public service? Social service? The concept of service in NARA's latest strategic plan offers an opportunity to consider the kind of service in which we engage as archivists and the way we describe archival work and labor. Are archives a product produced by archivists to be used by their customers? Or is there some other way of conceptualizing our service?

In this essay, I explore some of the issues that surface in thinking of archival service as customer service. Through a series of examples of archival work, I suggest ways to reframe archival service from the customer-/user-driven logic of archives-as-product to a model of archivist-as-facilitator and enabler of the creation and use of archives.

I start by unpacking how a customer service notion of archival service is, to an extent, built into the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) "Core Values of Archivists"[ii] definition of archival service. I then explicate issues with this customer service framing through a brief discussion of neoliberalism and civic institutions. I explore how participatory archives, engaging communities through crowdsourcing, and issues around labor in digital scholarship offer a means to potentially reframe archival service. I conclude by returning to the SAA "Core Values

Statement" definition of archival service and suggest ways that it might be refined to shift away from the customer service focus to a facilitative focus.

Framing Archival Service

Below is the full explication of service from the SAA "Core Values of Archivists" statement.

> Within the mandates and missions of their institutions, archivists provide effective and efficient connections to (and mediation for) primary sources so that users, whoever they may be, can discover and benefit from the archival record of society, its institutions, and individuals. Archivists serve numerous constituencies and stakeholders, which may include institutional administrators, creators and donors of documentary materials, rights holders, un/documented peoples, researchers using the archives for many distinct purposes, corporate and governmental interests, and/or citizens concerned with the information and evidence held in archival sources. Archivists seek to meet the needs of users as quickly, effectively, and efficiently as possible.[iii]

The first sentence establishes a relationship between archivists (providers) and users. It then identifies what that user relationship should result in: the discovery of and benefit from archival sources. In this context, the work of archivists and archives is to produce archives and enable their use as finished products. The relationship between archivists and archives users is transactional. The second sentence expands this notion of service a bit and suggests that service might not simply be about the product of an archives, but also the way the archives ethically engages with a wide range of stakeholders. However, the final sentence echoes the first, suggesting that "service" is actually customer service. In this context, the value of service for

archivists is measured by how efficiently we meet the needs of users. I think some points that could potentially help to reframe the first and the last sentences are not fully articulated in the second sentence. But, before getting to that, it is worth discussing further how the idea of archives as products is potentially problematic.

Customer Service, Archives, and Neoliberalism

In his 2005 presidential address, Randall Jimerson outlines three narratives of archival power: the temple, the prison, and the restaurant. Jimerson uses each of these narrative frames of archives as a means to explore issues related to the way archivists and scholars conceptualize archival work. Each of these frames offers different points of reference for understanding archival service. In the temple, archives serve as systems of authority and veneration. In the prison framing, archives function as sources of power and control. The notion of the archives as a metaphorical restaurant, where the finding aid is the menu and the archivist is the waitress, is a useful context for conceptualizing and examining our assumptions about concepts of customer service. Jimerson specifically focuses attention on the role of the archivist in interpretation and mediation. The archival waitress "welcomes the customer, interprets the menu, suggests an entrée or dessert, and collects the money before the customer exits." In this context, the archivist provides the product, and her customer consumes it. Jimerson continues, "It is a service role, but it comes with a measure of power and requires a reassuring smile if one wants a generous tip." In this frame, conceptualizing the archives user as a customer brings with it language of market values. This includes both the description of the product, as well as a gendered nod to the emotional labor of the archivist who provides service with a smile. In Jimerson's address, the visions of archives as temples, prisons, and restaurants become tools to critique many of the

assumed social functions of archives. His focus on using these metaphors to push archivists to embrace and understand the power they wield in shaping history and the fact that their work has never been neutral are as valuable and relevant today as they were in 2005. They continue to be valuable as frames of reference for exploring the implications of notions of archival service.

Exploring the work and service of archives in the language of the marketplace and business connects directly to an ongoing reframing of various cultural and civic institutions under the market logic of neoliberalism. In this case, the concept can be best unpacked by considering a parallel civic institution, the university, where the implications of neoliberalism have been much more extensively discussed.

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the terms and language of social and cultural institutions have been increasingly defined in terms of commodification and commercialization.[iv] This has had a significant impact on how many institutions function, but that impact is particularly evident and has been extensively discussed in relation to universities. Given that universities are home to many of the scholars and researchers that use archives and that many archives are themselves housed or anchored in universities, this is particularly worthwhile to consider.

Reframing students in higher education as customers yields several problematic results. Students cease to be members of a community of learners and become individuals only responsible to themselves. Students "are encouraged to think of themselves as 'receivers' of a service, not as co-creators of a teaching-learning community."[v] In the same vein, a course syllabus becomes "a

contract" and increasingly shifts students into roles as passive consumers of instructional

products. As this shift occurs, faculty researchers in many fields come increasingly to depend on

bringing in grant money or developing marketable technologies. This moves them further and

further away from focusing on teaching and learning. At the same time, market logic demands

that the transactional value of a university degree translate very directly into a career. Aspects of

the civic and cultural mission of the institution not easily translated into this market logic receive

less and less attention.[vi]

Jimerson's 2005 exploration of the metaphor of the archivist as waitress establishes archives and

the archivist as the provider of a product. This functions in a similar fashion to the examples of

neoliberalism in higher education. The archives is a provider of service with a smile. In this

framing, the service of an archives is transactional. It is about giving the customer what he or she

wants. If we take this mentality further, the archivist is primarily there to deliver what can be

found on the menu of the finding aid. In this framing, we begin to lose touch with the significant

role that archives play as civic, social, and cultural institutions.

Service in Participatory Archives

I opened this essay by considering NARA's strategic goal to "Connect with Customers." While

the focus on "customer service" has some problematic components, further into the goal, another

vision of archival service is embedded in the plan. Beyond the transactional logic of providing

archives to users, it also focuses on a desire to "cultivate public participation, and generate new

understanding of the importance of records in a democracy." The goal goes on to specifically

note that this focus is on "expand[ing] our use of public participation and crowdsourcing tools to

improve public access and engagement."[vii] This notion of public participation is at odds with a simplistic notion of customer-service-product relationships.

In what follows, I will explore a series of contexts in which ideas of coproduction, public engagement, crowdsourcing, and other participatory approaches are starting to offer a different conception of service. In this concept, service shifts away from providing a product to customers, to enabling and facilitating the coproduction of archives and public memory. While archivists generally do not produce records, the making of an archives as a product and a finding aid as a menu sets up the work of archival processing as the production of the archival product. These new contexts involve a shift from the archivist-as-producer to a model of the archivist-as-facilitator. It is worth underscoring that this concept is not particularly new, as it draws on a range of archival scholarship focused on how archives can better serve largely marginalized communities.

Engaging the Public through Crowdsourcing

As it is written, the SAA description of service largely presents the service of an archivist as providing access to records. In what follows, I discuss two contexts for how shifting into a model of coproducing the archives with stakeholders could offer a different way of thinking about the service that archivists and archives provide.

The first example focuses on a relatively minimal way of engaging with users through crowdsourcing the transcription of a manuscript collection. Ben Brumfield runs a range of crowdsourcing transcription projects in which users transcribe the text of various kinds of

manuscripts and records.[viii] During one transcription project, he noticed that a primary transcriber was slowing down, cutting back significantly on the time she spent transcribing the manuscripts. He contacted the volunteer to find out what had changed. She responded that not many manuscripts remained to transcribe, so she was spacing them out. For this transcriber, the two to three hours a day spent working on transcriptions became such an essential part of who she is that she needed to ration out those remaining pages. She wanted to make sure that the experience lasted as long as it could. When Brumfield found this out, he quickly put up additional pages. While he was getting valuable transcripts that make these records searchable, his volunteer was also getting something: an opportunity to participate in something and contribute to the historical record.

Beyond providing access to records as a commodity—a raw material with which the customers of archives can make things—an opportunity for service here runs far deeper. By engaging community stakeholders as volunteers and participants in the production of historical memory, we have the chance to provide meaningful ways for users to engage with archival work. Through this process, users discover a sense of belonging as a part of something bigger than themselves. These projects, far from exploiting people, which is often the case with many crowdsourcing efforts,[ix] can provide a way for them to find meaning and belonging by enabling them to make contributions to the public good. With this noted, more fully participatory approaches to the process of producing archives further refine how we conceptualize service.

From Coproduction to Facilitation

Efforts like A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, or the September 11th Digital Archive, function as platforms to facilitate collecting and sharing memories and documentation. They illustrate models by which the work of archivists and the service they provide shifts from archives producers and providers to archives enablers and facilitators. Exploring the context and approach to one of these projects, A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, helps to further illustrate a new vision of archival service. The project's website is worth quoting:

> *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland* collects, preserves, and shares the stories, memories, and accounts of police violence as experienced or observed by Cleveland citizens. Organized in Summer 2015 by Cleveland residents and professional archivists from across the United States, the archive hopes to provide the Cleveland community—especially survivors of police violence and the families of victims—a safe and secure space to share any testimony, documents, or accounts that narrate or reflect on encounters or effects of police violence in their lives and communities. [x]

The project allows individuals to share their stories and provides access to oral histories collected by archivists. However, as made clear in the description, the archivists who help develop the archives serve as facilitators and supporters of residents in a local community.

Jarett Drake has described one of the key aspects of this work as a move toward a new kind of trust between archivists and communities. This trust is particularly critical with communities facing oppression, largely at the hands of the very powers that sustain the institutions that establish and maintain most archives.[xi] In Drake's words, archives must "build trust with the

people, communities, and organizations around whose lives the movement is centered, a trust they should pursue not under the guise of collection development but under the practice of allyship."[xii] This push back against collection development, against acquisition of records, would require substantially reframing archival service. At the core of the SAA definition of service lies the idea that the collection is the product that the archivist serves to the customer. Moving to a model whereby archivists facilitate the work of others to establish and maintain archives seems completely out of scope for the current framing of archival service. In the latter context, archivists become enablers of archives instead of producers of them.

While the example of A People's Archive of Police Violence is recent, it builds on decades-old work exploring how to decolonize archival practice. To discover their histories, indigenous peoples of the United States must rely on documents collected, preserved, organized, and interpreted by those who decimated their nations.[xiii] Furthermore, any appeal to archival work as technical or neutral obfuscates the extent to which our institutions align and comply with wealth, power, and privilege.[xiv] In response, efforts like Kim Christen Withey and her team's work on Mukurtu to codevelop platforms and tools to enable tribal communities to control their records in terms that fit with their own cultures flourish.[xv] In working on participatory and liberatory archives, archivists not only better serve those communities, they also gain the opportunity to understand and represent records as the community understands them. Michelle Caswell suggests that by opening up the process of producing the archives, by making the production of an archives participatory, archives can serve communities by helping to create a sense of belonging.[xvi] Building on this, archivists can apply to the core definitions of our values lessons learned from working with those who have been marginalized. We have an opportunity to

rewrite our notions of service, reframing it around the idea of archivists as enablers rather than as producers and providers.

What Is Archival Labor in the Participatory Archives?

If we move further into this participatory and coproductive notion of our work, we end up circling back to the original problematic set of issues that come from the genesis of crowdsourcing in Silicon Valley. While the development of concepts of participatory archives predates notions of crowdsourcing, it is worth underscoring that the resonance between these ideas likely helped them take off. When the tech industry developed crowdsourcing as a concept, its appeal was largely grounded in the idea of outsourcing labor, that is, finding a way to get external crowds to do the work once done by paid workers. What does it mean to be an archivist if we increasingly hand off the work of appraisal and description to our communities? When I teach archives and digital curation graduate students about the possibilities of crowdsourcing, I focus on how it changes the work of an archivist. I assign Alison Miner's reflections on this issue. Miner, in 2010 a graduate student, asked, "how can I get paid for my profession if there are people out there who are willing to do the work for free?"[xvii] Crowdsourcing could itself contribute to destablizing the professional status of archivists. Given the proliferation of short-term project-archivist positions and the precariousness beginning archivists face today, questions about the implications for archival labor around crowdsourcing are particularly significant.

The question of what archivist do if others are willing to work for free could well be the basis for reframing the role of the service archivists provide. Archivists can potentially shift away from the "secretaries for dead people" role toward roles as community organizers of public memory,

facilitating learning experiences for their cocreators.[xviii] This could result in both a better understanding of records and valuable work to make records more accessible. However, it will involve rethinking what can often be a factory floor model of the work of archives. In many archives, labor roles of individual archivists and organizational hierarchies are structured around the tasks required to produce archives as products and then to serve those products to end users. Truly embracing a more participatory approach to archival service would require rethinking how these roles function in archival organizations.

Blurring Lines between Scholarship and Knowledge Infrastructure

The concept of coproduction is also relevant to the relationship between archivists and scholars. Once again, these discussions of service become entangled with questions of labor. Under the heading of "digital humanities," a range of scholars has begun efforts to produce "digital archives" and online collections as well as interfaces and representations of primary source materials. This process has resulted in the development of a class of digital humanities librarians and archivists for whom the concept of their work as "service" is problematic.[xix]

When scholars produce books and articles and archivists and librarians facilitate access to primary and secondary sources for the production of such scholarship, the concept of archivist and librarian providing this commodity service to scholars works relatively well. Archives and libraries are and continue to function as the infrastructure of knowledge. Providing that kind of service, acting as a platform for scholarship, is a vital role. However, increasingly, digital humanities projects are becoming hybrids of an interpretation of primary sources and a mode of direct access to primary sources. These forms of scholarship take on knowledge infrastructure

roles different from those of monographs or journal articles. They involve issues of classification, taxonomy, and questions of how to organize and structure information that can connect with other arrangements of knowledge. At the same time, many of these scholars parlay their expertise in creating projects like these into jobs and positions in libraries and archives. An opportunity exists here for archivists and librarians to move into these roles, but only if they make clear the necessity of their theory and practice. In that vein, the service of an archivist can be understood as presenting subject matter expertise in how sources of knowledge should be structured and organized and as understanding the roles that various stakeholders should play in establishing those structures.

The expertise of the archivist and the librarian in the organization of knowledge and records is of core relevance to the design of digital scholarship. If sustainable and interoperable forms of digital scholarship are to create a hybrid form of knowledge infrastructure, librarians and archivists must be viewed less as service providers and more as partners and cocreators.

From Archives Consumers to Archives Coproducers or Facilitators

I opened this essay asking if the customer service framing of the relationship between archivists and their users is problematic. I believe it is, particularly when it frames the service of archivists in gendered notions of producing and serving archives as products. I think the idea of the archivist as a waitress as opposed to a professional like a doctor or a lawyer is problematic. Exploring that question opens a far more critical question for consideration: what do we have to potentially gain by reframing some of the fundamental notions of service within our profession?

In terms of the Society for American Archivists' core archival values, "archivists provide effective and efficient connections to (and mediation for) primary sources so that users, whoever they may be, can discover and benefit from the archival record of society, its institutions, and individuals." In this context, our service is about enabling the use of records, not about enabling our communities to have a voice and a role in the production of the archives themselves. SAA's definition concludes, "Archivists seek to meet the needs of users as quickly, effectively, and efficiently as possible." With this characterization comes some of that sense of the waitress providing service with a smile. Speed and efficiency in giving users what they need remains valuable, and many archives still have work to do to advance the idea that they exist for their users and not just for the records themselves. However, we have an opportunity to consider expanding our concept of service to include engaging communities in the work to actually produce archives.

The examples I have provided here offer several different potential conceptions of archival service. In the case of the transcription crowdsourcing project, we see archivists providing opportunities for people to find meaning and belonging by participating in enhancing digitized historical records. In the case of A Peoples Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, we see the potential for archivists to move into roles as facilitators of community creation of archives. In the case of digital scholarship and digital humanities projects, we find the potential for archivists to move into roles as experts in the design and creation of knowledge infrastructures. Throughout all of these cases, archivists takes a step back from making or creating archives and instead become enablers of archives. By inviting others into the process of producing archives and

sharing what we have learned about organizing knowledge through the production of archives, we may find the most valuable way to serve.

Returning to the concept of service in the SAA values, responding to these points might suggest revisions to the value of service such as these:

> Within the mandates and missions of their institutions, archivists ~~provide effective and efficient connections to (and mediation for)~~ *engage with communities to facilitate collecting and organizing* primary sources so that ~~users, whoever they may be,~~ *communities* can discover and benefit from the archival record of society, its institutions, and individuals. Archivists serve numerous constituencies and stakeholders, which may include institutional administrators, creators and donors of documentary materials, rights holders, un/documented peoples, researchers using the archives for many distinct purposes, corporate and governmental interests, and/or citizens concerned with the information and evidence held in archival sources. Archivists seek to ~~meet the needs of users~~ enable participation of communities they serve in all aspects of their work as ~~quickly~~ ethically, effectively, and efficiently as possible.

Ideas of participatory archives, of crowdsourcing, and of engagement with the public in the coproduction of the archival record brings with them the potential for new concepts of the service that archivists and archives can provide. Beyond producing archival products that their users consume and use, it is increasingly possible for archivists to facilitate and enable communities of users to collect, organize, arrange, describe, preserve, and provide access to

records. In this vein, the concept of the service role of archivists can be expanded to include the roles of community organizers, activists, and educators.

[i] U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. U.S. National Archives and Records Administration Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2014–2018. March 2014. Washington D.C. https://www.archives.gov/files/about/plans-reports/strategic-plan/2014/nara-strategic-plan-2014-2018.pdf .

[ii] "Core Values of Archivists," Society of American Archivists, May 2011, https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics#core_values.

[iii] "Core Values of Archivists," Society of American Archivists, May 2011, https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics#core_values.

[iv] See M. Apple, *Educating the Right Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2001); or A. Przeworski, "The Neoliberal Fallacy," *Journal of Democracy* 3, no. 3 (2008): 45–59, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1992.0044.

[v] J. A. Newson, "Disrupting the 'Student as Consumer' Model: The New Emancipatory Project," *International Relations* 18, no. 2 (2004): 230, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0047117804042674.

[vi] D. B. Saunders, "Neoliberal Ideology and Public Higher Education in the United States," *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008): 41–77.

[vii] US National Archives and Records Administration, *US National Archives and Records Administration Strategic Plan 2014–2018* (Washington, DC), http://www.archives.gov/about/plans-reports/strategic-plan/2014/nara-strategic-plan-2014-2018.pdf.

[viii] For more on this example, and this argument, see T. Owens, "Digital Cultural Heritage and the Crowd, *Curator: The Museum Journal* 56, no. 1 (2013): 121–30.

[ix] For discussion of the ethical problems with crowdsourcing, see V.Williamson, "On the Ethics of Crowdsourced Research," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49, no. 1 (2016): 77–81; and J.Webster, "Microworkers of the Gig Economy: Separate and Precarious," *New Labor Forum* 25 (2016): 56–64.

[x] A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, http://archivingpoliceviolence.org.

[xi] K. Shilton and R. Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections,"*Archivaria* 63 (2007): 87–101.

[xii] J. M. Drake, "Expanding #ArchivesForBlackLives to Traditional Archival Repositories," *On Archivy* (blog), June 27, 2016, https://medium.com/on-archivy/expanding-archivesforblacklives-to-traditional-archival-repositories-b88641e2daf6.

[xiii] W. Hagan, "Archival Captive—The American Indian," *American Archivist* 41, no. 2 (1978): 135–42, https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.41.2.307223q5h80244r7.

[xiv] H. Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 14–26.

[xv] K. C. Withey, "Sovereignty, Repatriation, and the Archival Imagination," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 11, no. 2 (2015): 115–38.

[xvi] M. Caswell, "Assessing the Use of Community Archives," US IMLS RE-31-16-0117-16, Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2016, https://www.imls.gov/sites/default/files/grants/re-31-16-0117-16/proposals/re-31-16-0117-16_proposal_documents.pdf.

[xvii] A. Miner, "If Everything on the Internet Has to Be Free, Why Isn't My Healthcare, Too?," *You Ought to Be Ashamed* (blog), October 11, 2010, https://eatingouryoung.wordpress.com/2010/10/11/if-everything-on-the-internet-has-to-be-free-why-isn%E2%80%99t-my-healthcare-too/

[xviii] M. Callahan, "The Value of Archival Description, Considered," *Chaos—> Order* (blog), presented at Radcliffe Workshop on Technology and Archival Processing, Cambridge, MA, April 3, 2014, https://icantiemyownshoes.wordpress.com/2014/04/04/the-value-of-archival-description-considered.

[xix] R. Shirazi, "Reproducing the Academy: Librarians and the Question of Service in the Digital Humanities," presented at the American Library Association Annual Conference, Las Vegas, NV, July 15, 2014, http://roxanneshirazi.com/2014/07/15/reproducing-the-academy-librarians-and-the-question-of-service-in-the-digital-humanities.