

FORUM

With the exception of editing for conformity to capitalization, punctuation, and citation style, letters to the Forum are published verbatim.

American Archivist Cover Controversy

To the editor:

I am sure others were as surprised as I was to find in the Fall/Winter 2004 issue of the *American Archivist* that a controversy had erupted over the use of a political poster on the cover of the Fall/Winter 2003 issue of the journal. I loved the cover. Not only was it a *great* political poster—controversial and visually arresting—but it drew you into the innards of the journal. When I first saw the cover, I turned to the inside description of the cover illustration and read about the poster being a “striking example of the powerful messages that can be conveyed by political posters” and that it related to Susan Tschabrun’s essay considering “many of the issues archivists face in developing and administering poster collections.” Of course, I then read the essay, and, once inside it, I perused the remainder of the issue. I remember thinking that this was a noteworthy cover, because it did what journal covers should do—got people to read the journal’s contents.

At the time, I certainly did not realize just how noteworthy the *American Archivist* cover was, but I recently found myself reading letters from a group of business archivists and another prominent archivist about how the cover “disturbed” them, how it “seems inappropriate for an association whose membership includes both archivists working in corporations or at universities and historical societies whose holdings include business records,” that it “represents an unnecessary legal risk for the Society” and “sends all of the wrong messages to managers who already view the preservation of the historical record as tangential to contemporary business practice,” how that cover “holds the potential to undermine the professional credibility of SAA members who work in business settings,” that the journal was now an “attack ad against corporations,” and that the poster’s use “places sensationalism and circulation above all other

priorities.” Whoa, I thought, never have so many been offended since I last opened my mouth at a session at a professional conference!

Of course, I then read Phil Eppard’s reasoned response about the criticisms of the use of the cover. He describes how he had the Society’s legal counsel review the use of the poster and rightly points out that the *American Archivist* serves the “whole archival profession,” suggesting as a result that disagreement about the journal’s content and covers will always be present. Most astounding, in my estimation, was Eppard’s revelation that the letters he received on the “Sun Mad” poster were the first such letters that he had received in more than five years! If I were Phil Eppard, I would have this issue’s cover framed and hung in my office. If anything should upset people about this controversy, it ought to be the lack of professional discourse about the Society’s journal, one of the leading forces in supporting the development of and commentary on the knowledge of our field.

Obviously, I support Phil Eppard’s use of the poster and his explanation about it, but I also wanted, as both a former *American Archivist* editor and current SAA publications editor, to make some additional observations about the cover controversy. My first reaction in reading the letters and editor’s response, other than the surprise mentioned earlier, was to feel a chill run down my spine. Will we have to achieve the complete happiness of every group in the profession when we select a cover illustration, a task sure to lead one to abandon anything other than putting plain covers on every Society publication? Is the apparent offense limited only to covers, or would it extend to the content of the journal, and other publications, as well? Publication in the journal, as well as other publications issued by the Society, supports the ongoing development of professional knowledge, and, as part of this professional knowledge there must be room for a diversity of opinions, including even controversial ideas and opinions.

The cover controversy also made me wonder about the mission of corporate archives. After all, the illustration on the ill-fated *American Archivist* cover was part of an archival collection. Is the mission of a corporate archives only to make the organization look good or to serve a public relations purpose? What about the values of records and their management for purposes such as legal compliance, evidence of activities, and accountability? If a company found such negative documents and artifacts in their possession as the political poster used on the journal cover, would it destroy or bury the objects? These questions are not meant to malign the character of the letter writers, all of whom are fine people and archivists, but their concern over the use of the poster in defense of corporate values troubles me. At the least, it would be useful to have some scholarly and professional writing exploring the purpose of corporate archives and the activities of other institutions collecting the records of corporations, adding to a topic in the literature that is a bit threadbare. Of course, such writing would

in itself be controversial, I surmise, apart from whether a cover was used to supplement an essay or two on such a subject.

Let's be honest, however, in acknowledging that the corporate role in society has always been controversial, and never so much as today. The recent corporate scandals, leading to new efforts to regulate corporate accounting practices as witnessed in the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, very much concerned with how corporations administer their records, are but an example of their place in our culture. Moreover, books are pouring out addressing matters ranging from the corporation's not always positive role in a democratic society to their efforts in controlling intellectual property and information to their ethical practices or lack thereof. One cannot read a newspaper on any given day without reading about some corporate scandal, so the idea that the *American Archivist's* cover may possibly have offended a corporate leader or two seems a bit misplaced; I suspect CEOs have a lot more on their mind these days than an *American Archivist* cover. Indeed, within academe the primary debate now seems to be over the "corporate" model of the university, where revenue drives everything, students are customers, faculty members are labor, and selling credentials seems more important than education. What might be more controversial than the "Sun Mad" cover would be a cover running any one of the thousands of advertisements touting the positive attributes of corporate influence on our culture.

What intrigues me is how the individual functioning as an archivist or records manager can work in the corporate environment in any realistic way, adhering to any sense of professional ethics or mission. Again, this is not addressed at the specific letter writers in this controversy, but the comment is aimed more broadly at a professional matter. For example, where were the records managers in the tobacco companies all those years that these corporations' placed their records programs under the administration of legal departments so that a client-lawyer confidentiality could be claimed and records documenting the unhealthy results of smoking buried? What is the archivist to do when asked to destroy certain records or to keep them under wraps, or when he or she discovers illegal or questionable activity on the part of their employers? These are not easy questions and there are not pat answers, but suggesting that the Society should be overly concerned about the use of a particular political poster is, in my opinion, way off base from the kinds of concerns we, as a profession, ought to be addressing.

Most disturbing to me was the implied threat of litigation due to the use of the illustration. No one will deny such a possibility, but given that any individual or organization might sue the Society over any issue, can such a concern be the primary factor determining how a professional association acts? Worrying about this would preclude the Society from taking any professional stance, issuing any public pronouncement, and, yes, the Society ought to stop publishing

its newsletter and the *American Archivist* as well. It ought to get out of the publishing business altogether and close down its operations. At the least, the Society ought to cease the expansion of its publications catalog, out of fear that it will pick some publication that might express an opinion about records management or archives that a few members of the Society might not like. And what a loss this would be.

And what a contradiction this would be as well. Records can be, by their very nature, inherently controversial. They document good and bad actions, the activities of evil and exemplary people and organizations, the decisions by corrupt and stellar government officials and corporate leaders, and the activities of strong and weak university administrators and faculty members. Records show us the best and worst in people, institutions, societies, and humanity. And records inspire debate about the nature of whether we can ascertain the truth of the past, and the debate certainly continues within the archival community and the disciplines using archival records. And, it might be added, records, due to their power as memory and cultural symbols, inspire strong feelings, just as the “Sun Mad” poster does. Does this mean that we cannot preserve or use the poster because it elicits emotions or potentially offends someone or some organization? Hopefully, we will affirm that this is not the case, as well as the impossibility of administering any document in a way that will not generate responses.

I am not advocating that any editor or author should go out of his or her way to offend deliberately a colleague. What I am fretting about is the sheer impossibility of avoiding hurting someone’s feelings, slighting someone, or angering some individual or organization. It is embedded in the business of preserving our documentary heritage. And, in this present controversy, there is a silver lining. I received my copy of the *American Archivist* with the letters and editor’s reply just as I was beginning to teach my course, Archival Access and Advocacy, a course constructed around controversies in the archival and records management community, and while in the midst of writing a book on ethical and accountability issues involving the administering of records in our digital era. What a great case study to mull over. What a good set of complex and troubling issues for my students to think about, and for this I can thank equally the epistle writers and the editor. And, yes, I look forward to the next *American Archivist* cover and the tempest that it might stimulate as well. This is a fun job (until I have to pick a cover design for one of my own books or, shudder, suggest a cover for an SAA publication).

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