

needs to be done on the *preventive* or *defensive* aspects of ethics to stave off ethical quandaries where possible. That is surely one of the overarching lessons of these cases.

The cases in *Ethics and the Archival Profession* have been authored by an impressive array of highly regarded professionals, and they are both well written and cover real-life conditions that could arise with any archivist. As noted earlier here, they are almost entirely oriented toward archivists dealing with manuscript collections—about 10 percent are oriented to state, university, or private sector archives. Although the situations largely have relevance beyond manuscript archivists and curators, the book might have been seen to be of greater relevance had there been greater balance in the case venues. But archivists in local, state, provincial, and national governments, and indeed in the private sector, should not so misjudge the relevance of this book to their own workplaces and daily decision making. The bottom line is that ethical dilemmas are universal in the archives and records management world, and professionals need to know how to address them. In this, *Ethics and the Archival Profession* hits the mark well and fulfills important roles in formal and continuing education programs and as a quick reference tool.

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Thirty Years of Electronic Records

Edited by Bruce I. Ambacher. Lanham, Md. and Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, 2003. xix, 190 pp. Available from the Society of American Archivists, \$36 members, \$42 nonmembers. ISBN 0-8108-4769-8.

The clearly stated purpose of *Thirty Years of Electronic Records* is to sing the praises of the custodial electronic records program at the National Archives and Records Administration over the past thirty years and make publicly known both its struggles and accomplishments. This book does an admirable job of celebrating, enlisting prominent figures (prominent both within NARA and the larger archival community) to contribute twelve essays. They document the important work that was completed, share anecdotes about interesting solutions to technical problems, grumble about recurring budgetary problems, and outline hopes and plans for the future. There is just cause for such celebration, especially considering all that has been accomplished by these people and the obstacles they overcame. The book testifies to a seemingly constant flux of staffing and budgetary constraints imposed on the archives

by different presidential administrations, as well as the scarcity of peer institutions to turn to for support. No other institution is as large or has exactly the same requirements. Furthermore, during this period, few other “archival programs. . . actually took any electronic records into custody and attempted to preserve them over the long term.”

Today’s archivist is able to deal with electronic records more successfully because of the strides made by NARA and its electronic records program. New archivists have little need even to consider many of the issues that seemed almost insurmountable several years ago. A new archivist, even a lone university archivist, would not even consider the preservation of electronic records until he or she has, at the very least, access to the technologies and procedures suitable for the tasks required. In most cases, archivists already have the technologies at their fingertips to allow storage media to be refreshed and reference copies to be produced. Trudy H. Peterson describes the situation when the electronic records program, “had no computer processing equipment, so all tapes had to be taken out [in their cars] to a contractor for duplication, whether for preservation or reference.” New archivists can scarcely imagine such a situation, and they have little need to. In a sense, they are able to stand upon the shoulders of giants, almost oblivious to the obstacles that have been overcome by this, “the oldest, largest, and most actively managed program for electronic records in the world.”

The book’s twelve essays are compiled into eight chapters that are sometimes organized chronologically and sometimes topically. (The inclusion of an index, however, would have facilitated better access to the book’s content.) Meyer H. Fishbein’s “Recollections of an Electronic Records Pioneer” and Thomas E. Brown’s “History of NARA’s Custodial Program for Electronic Records” adequately recount the history of the custodial electronic records program. Mark Conrad’s “Early Intervention” traces the development and impact of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission’s electronic records research agenda. Completing the arc, Kenneth Thibodeau’s “Building the Future” maps the course for the Electronic Records Archives that is currently under development. Chapters 2–4 (contributed by Linda J. Henry, Bruce Ambacher, and Margaret O’Neill Adams, respectively) refocus on events already recounted in the light of the archival activities of appraisal, processing, description, and reference. This arrangement of the chapters leads to a certain amount of repetition as important events like the PROFS case or the cutbacks suffered in the 1980s are rehashed over and over. Similar territory is covered by an uneven chapter containing contributions from four different administrators responsible for managing the electronic records program at the National Archives between 1975 and 1988. At times, these contributions expend too much energy discussing the changing placement of the electronic records program or get bogged down in a mire of acronyms that renders the material

difficult to digest. Important issues are clouded amid the recounting of myriad organizational changes that hearken back in style to the Old Testament (NNPD begets NNR, NNR begets NNSR, NNSR begets NNX, NNX begets NSX, and NSX begets NWME).

One chapter does stand out from the others. Jason R. Baron's "The PROFS Decade: NARA, E-mail, and the Courts" is the one essay of enduring value that will likely have the most influence on future archival and electronic records professionals. Baron's essay is not the first, nor most thorough, account of the PROFS case (he cites a number of prominent examples in his notes), but it is perhaps the most interesting account written to date, presented in a style that makes the important subject matter accessible even to those with only a very general interest in electronic records. This essay seems destined to end up on a number of archival education reading lists and will help instruct a generation of future archivists about electronic records.

Beyond Baron's PROFS piece, it is not entirely clear who might best benefit from reading this book. As a celebration, it is perhaps most valuable to all those who have been directly or indirectly involved in NARA's work on electronic records. However, given the small number of archival programs in the United States that have actually implemented functioning electronic records programs, it seems possible that some might be looking to this book as a guide to establishing a program. The intention of this book was never to guide, and it is not a blueprint for the development of an electronic records program. The authors make it clear that NARA is unlike any other archival institution and that new types of electronic records demand new archival methods, not an "extension of the successes of yesterday." However, knowledge of the work of NARA can only help the budding archivist or emergent electronic records program. In this sense, the book does have something to offer.

For the reader only generally interested in electronic records issues or unfamiliar with the particulars of NARA and electronic records practice, this book can only paint a picture of past progress rather than guide future development. It is not a groundbreaking work identifying new information about NARA. The authors represent one particular point of view, with little effort made to including opposing viewpoints. That was not part of the book's purpose, of course, but more experienced readers wish to see beyond the celebration.

A close examination of *Thirty Years of Electronic Records*, however, reveals a broader context in which the electronic records program has operated within NARA. The picture is one of constant organizational change, fluctuation of budgets, and a bureaucracy not necessarily concerned with the preservation of electronic records. Both specialists and generalists would have benefited from a more cohesive message throughout the entire book—perhaps a better sense of some of the lessons that might be learned from all of NARA's hard work and experience with electronic records—for there are certainly lessons to be learned

from NARA's experience. Any organization wishing to manage and preserve electronic records must have organizational viability, technological suitability, and financial sustainability. This book describes how an inability to maintain sufficient staff levels and to obtain positive input from outside experts and peer organizations threatened the long-term viability of NARA's electronic records program. For a long time, the electronic records program at NARA did not have access to the technology suitable for the work that needed to be done. Perhaps most importantly, this book describes a constant battle to maintain fiscal sustainability amid constantly changing economies and government budget conditions. These are the issues that every repository of electronic records must seek to master, and a stimulating consideration of these issues may be the most important reason to read *Thirty Years of Electronic Records*.

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