Relating Through Time, Space, and Smudged Glass: A Reflection on John Fleckner’s 2000 Keynote


By Brenna Edwards, Manager for Digital Archives, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Shaping archival literature is an honor, but how have foundational readings, lectures, and keynotes fared over time? The world and our profession have drastically changed in the last twenty years, yet some aspects remain the same. At the New England Archivists spring conference in 2000, John Fleckner gave a keynote address entitled “Enduring Values Within Glass Houses,” in which he offered advice on how archivists should approach the new millennium and technologies while maintaining their core values.

Fleckner structured his keynote in two parts: part one, “Not Your Father’s Archives/Archivists Who Live in Glass Houses,” and part two, “Enduring Values.” Part one focuses on how technology had begun to change the archival world, from OCLC terminals and networked connectivity to the public peering into the inner workings of archives through close inspections of online cataloging records, finding aids, and policies. Part two reflects on what Fleckner considers the four core values of the archival profession, which he defines as humanistic; centered on thinking, inquiring, and learning; ethical; and collaborative. Fleckner describes how archivists embody each value through their skills and practices, while also discussing how advances in technology might impact and potentially improve their work. Overall, the keynote is optimistic about the ways technology and archives can intersect and grow, while also being cautious about archivists maintaining their core values.
In this review, I reflect on these themes and how they are still relevant to archival work today. I also offer personal anecdotes as a digital archivist and thoughts about how other digital archivists might interpret and build upon Fleckner’s ideas.

Part One: Not Your Father’s Archives/Archivists Who Live in Glass Houses

Fleckner begins his address by describing personal encounters with technology from the 1960s to the 1990s, speaking about how his perceptions changed from frustration with punch cards to delight with networked information and pride in how librarians and archives embraced the “information technology revolution” (p. 2). While these changes have been positive, they have also led to an increase in demands from the public because more information is readily available, according to Fleckner. He also discusses how the “very nature of the archival record is changing inexorably” (p. 2), how archives should be prepared to store electronic information long-term, and what challenges might arise with electronic records. Part one ends on a nostalgic note, with Fleckner reflecting on the loss of “craft traditions . . . in the face of new, less tangible record formats” (p. 3) and observing how fast the world is moving with no slowdown in sight.

While his statements about how the world keeps moving and concern about “diminished resources available for our work” (p. 3) certainly ring true today, especially in terms of staffing and salaries, Fleckner also appeared to have an all-or-nothing approach to electronic records. He believed that archival collections would be solely electronic and that analog collections would no longer be accessioned. While many people adjacent to the archival profession have expressed this sentiment over the years, archives, in my experience, are still accessioning mostly analog material and only receive a small amount of electronic material. For example, for every ten banker boxes of analog material we accession at my institution, we only accession about five gigabytes of born-digital material. Although the exact proportion of analog to born-digital material changes depending on the collection, my institution only has a few collections that are majority born-digital materials. However, as archives collect more contemporary materials, archivists expect these collections to become majority electronic with small amounts of physical materials, which is in line with Fleckner’s predictions—even if we aren’t there quite yet.

Fleckner characterizes the pre-information technology era in archives as a “closed vault” (p. 1), with archives imposing restrictions on who could access materials, and the information technology era as a “publicized, brightly lit glass house” (p. 2), where everyone, the public and archives professionals, can peek inside archives at any time and see what they contain. Considering this address was given a year and a half after Google was founded but only months before it exploded in popularity when Yahoo! chose it as its default search engine,¹ I was surprised to learn that

---

archives had embraced technology relatively early to share information about their collections. Fleckner expands on this idea by listing how archives and libraries utilized multiple avenues, like virtual exhibits and reference help through websites and email, to share different aspects of their collections. Suddenly, there was a way to find what you wanted without having to visit the library or archives in person—you just needed a computer, keyboard, and the internet!

This level of access, however, has a downside as well. With more accessibility comes more demands for archivists’ time, attention, and resources—a world we know all too well in 2023 and a phenomenon felt even more during the COVID-19 pandemic. When most archives shifted to online and remote work during the height of the pandemic, archivists and librarians relied on the internet to reach out to the communities they served. They transitioned programs to online formats, launched collecting initiatives to capture content about the pandemic experience, and connected to colleagues in work-from-home settings; many of these practices are still in use today. An example of a collecting initiative was the Theatre 2020 Project by the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, which focused on theatre companies’ reactions and practices during the height of the pandemic. From September 2020 to October 2022, project coordinators collected initial communications during shutdowns in March 2020, Zoom performances and oral interviews, digital programs, and documents and communications about reopening planning. I began project development with the performing arts curator when I started at the Ransom Center in July 2020, and it was a learning experience in born-digital collecting through the use of university-supported commercial products like Box. It was also fascinating to see what individuals and companies created during this tumultuous time and how creativity persevered. While I don’t believe a pandemic is what Fleckner envisioned when talking about how computers would be “very important for day-to-day living” (p. 8), I do think this level of connectivity is the closest to what he envisioned the world would be like in the new millennium, in terms of technology and the role it plays in the archival world, from his view in the year 2000.

**Part Two: Enduring Values**

In the second part of his address, Fleckner focuses on the “four characteristics of our profession which will serve us well into the future” (p. 3) and outlines each of them. In many ways, Fleckner’s characteristics presage the Core Values of Archivists statement that the Society of American Archivists (SAA) created in May 2011 and updated in August 2020.3 The Core Values “articulates a set of principles that serve

---


both as a reminder of how archivists should strive to engage professionally and as a primer for contextualizing archivists’ role in a greater societal sense."4 The core values that SAA identifies are access and use, accountability, advocacy, diversity, history and memory, preservation, responsible stewardship, selection, service, social responsibility, and sustainability. While these themes are present in Fleckner’s address, archivists have expanded upon his ideas of the profession’s core values over the past twenty-three years.

Before going into each characteristic more thoroughly, I want to quickly point out that much of what Fleckner discusses rings true today, including some of the problems and concerns he raised about the profession. Technology continues to develop and improve at an accelerated pace, but at the heart of this profession are humans. We have flaws, and those flaws can be perpetuated in the technology we produce and maintain. Recent movements advocate revisiting aids and conscientiously editing them, creating new collecting initiatives, and expanding representation in our collections to counteract white supremacy5 and fascism6 in the United States, which should not be ignored.7 Efforts to diversify archives, both public and inward facing, are important as archives should reflect the country we live in and confront ugly truths about the past. Diversifying the archives profession is just as important. Though archival theory and practice have mostly remained the same over the years, the people who make up our profession increasingly come from different backgrounds, as evidenced in the 2022 A*CENSUS II report. The percentage of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) doubled since 2004, and the percentage of self-identifying women in the profession increased by 6 percent.8 This demographic shift continues to encourage progress towards fixing the problems Fleckner identifies, while also strengthening the characteristics he describes.

**Characteristic One: Humanistic Profession**

Fleckner’s first characteristic states that archives are a humanistic profession. He says that our mission “to identify, assess, manage, preserve, and make accessible a useable record of the past” fulfills a human “need” “to locate ourselves in space and time in an otherwise alienating universe” (p. 3). This idea of wanting to belong and see ourselves reflected in history is a strong one and extends into the communities

---

4 “SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics.”
we build as archivists through networking, social media, and conferences. Building community and feeling a part of something is important to the human experience, and we have more ways to interact with each other than ever. We help each other make the profession better and challenge its existing structures and beliefs together, a concept I will revisit in the section on the collaborative value of the archival profession.

Even as we acknowledge that we all want to belong, we must also consider the right to be forgotten— not everyone wants to be remembered or associated with certain parts of history, such as activity in protests or social movements. This concept has arisen as social media has become omnipresent in our society. As archivists, we (mostly) accept that not everything will be or should be saved, and we respect the wishes of those inadvertently included in archives; these tenets fall under the SAA Core Values of social responsibility and accountability. An example is when archivists document social movements through social media capture; most people participating in social movements do not know that archivists may share content about them and that the content may impact them later in life. Many institutions that make social media collections publicly available also have a take-down policy, which allows people to request for the content to be removed or restricted for a specific length of time.

Fleckner ends this section by discussing how the study of humans is “not the exclusive province of scholars and intellectuals” (p. 3) and how others, such as primary school educators, have expanded and interpreted new ways to include digital archival materials into lessons. From initiatives like the Teaching with Primary Sources Collective10 to small grant opportunities presented to students to create something new from archival material,11 people are using archives for more than research papers, books, and presentations. Sharing physical materials has become easier, with libraries and archives making scans and putting them online, as well as born-digital materials expanding the ideas of what an archive is.

However, there are still issues with access, as most institutions do not have adequate staff to make all their collections available online. Due to this limitation, and conditions of some materials rendering them unsafe to digitize, there is still a need for in-person visits to view most materials, which often require a photo ID to gain access to the reading room area. This is limiting and contrasts with Fleckner’s views about the audience archives are trying to reach outside traditional scholarly pursuits. Reaching communities outside of the physical building often is regulated to

---

grant work and finite initiatives due to limited staff, time, training, and monetary resources.

*Characteristic Two: Thinking, Inquiring, Learning Profession*

Fleckner’s second characteristic is that archivists are a “thinking, inquiring, learning profession” (p. 3), and as a profession, archivists should be eager to continue learning how to be the most effective in our roles as stewards of our collections. Due to the nature of archival work, archivists encounter a “head-spinning variety of forms, formats, and subjects” (p. 4), and should accept that not knowing something is inevitable. This lack of knowing is proven true frequently in my own experience. While digital file formats have begun to standardize due to marketplace dominance of companies like Microsoft and Adobe, odd formats still appear in collections, either from recent specialized programs or older files that cannot be read easily. Willingness to go down the rabbit hole and learn about these types of formats, practices, and context surrounding them is part of being a digital archivist (and archivist generally). Even random tidbits you pick up from reading or just general knowledge encounters can help with this job in the most unexpected ways. I once went on a tangent about catgut and what it was used for when a bottle of it was found in a medical collection being put up for an exhibit! The idea of knowing “everything and nothing” applies to archives, as we cannot know “everything,” but we can learn about the gaps of “nothing” we are presented with in processing a newly acquired collection.

Fleckner continues by discussing how archival principles, along with appraisal and descriptive practices, are important to defining archives. At the end of this section, he states that “fundamental critical thinking skills of analysis, argument, and clear expression” (p. 4) are also important to consider when characterizing archival work. Fleckner also expresses surprise at how descriptive work, being clear and concise, was “largely ignored” by the archival community while also stating this work is more important than ever in the world of “unmediated access to information” (p. 4). Coming from a non-historian background, but raised by a technical editor, I found it interesting how archival writing and technical editing overlap and can play into initiatives such as conscientious editing and open documentation. Documentation is important, and being able to express information clearly, whether descriptive or technical, is central to others discovering and interpreting what is being described. As more people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences come into the archival profession, approaches to description will continue to evolve from their insights to implement change.

*Characteristic Three: Ethical Profession*

Thirdly, Fleckner states archivists are an “ethical profession . . . that [has] a code of ethics” (p. 5). While no official archivists’ code existed when Fleckner gave his address, there was an understanding of what was expected of archivists in their
work. SAA created their official Code of Ethics\(^\text{12}\) in 2005, five years after this address, and updated it twice since its inception, once in January 2012 and again in August 2020.\(^\text{13}\) Having the Code of Ethics online and accessible makes it easier for archivists to put their hands on it, read it, embody it, and make sure it is reflected in their day-to-day work. Archivists can even use the Internet Archive to see how the Code has changed over time, thanks to their web page-capturing work.\(^\text{14}\)

Fleckner mentions living in an era of “suspicion, even cynicism, about all institutions” (p. 5), which is fascinating given the timing of this address: post-Y2K, but before 9/11. With even more suspicion of institutions and companies today, thanks in part to technology and never-ending news streams, our profession’s move to be even more open and transparent about our processes and workflows is more important than ever. This is evident in the SAA Core Values of Access and Use, Advocacy, Service, and Sustainability—not only for our peers, but also for the public to fully understand the work that goes on “behind the scenes” when preparing materials. Open houses and tours fulfill this by showing what archivists do and how access works at our institutions. Acknowledging that institutions do not have the same workflows due to different resources available helps show the variability in our profession and the tools we use to successfully create workflows.\(^\text{15}\)

*Characteristic Four: Collaborative Profession*

Lastly, Fleckner points out that archivists are a “collaborative profession” (p. 6), which I find to be very true. The archivists I encounter are always excited to share processes, thoughts, and general brainstorms, whether in a public setting or over email or coffee. This also applies to those I have encountered in related professions, or as Fleckner puts it, “allied professions” (p. 6). Technology has helped a lot with those connections, especially social media—Twitter, Facebook, and Mastodon have all connected me to people in various professions where we learn from each other. Different viewpoints on a problem have resulted in creative solutions, especially in the digital archives world where solving coding issues makes workflows more efficient. Being aware of the challenges other archivists, librarians, and information professions are facing allows broader information sharing, advocacy, and preparation for potential backlash or unwanted attention on collections. From book bans and book challenges to funding problems and disaster recovery, knowing who to contact with questions is easier than ever thanks to technology.

\(^{12}\)“SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics.”
\(^{13}\)“SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics.”
There are also opportunities to find solutions to problems information professionals face. For example, Fleckner mentions solutions to “long term management of information in electronic form” (p. 6). While I do not believe the digital professional community has devised a solution to this problem that works for everyone, what we have come up with in terms of workflows and storage protocols has been the result of many different institutions and professionals coming together to solve the problem. These solutions, such as implementing Box or Google Drive to act as remote viewing portals for materials, have also been shared through open access documentation and workflows, linked data projects, and conference presentations so others can discover and learn how to implement them.

Outside of institutional settings, there are many people who collect materials they care about in their own time. Fleckner calls them “the savers, the unofficial archivists, the advocates for the record,” and argues that we “should not lose sight of another group of individuals who share our goals but not professional identifications” (p. 6). This connects back to the first characteristic in this section of his address, about how humans want to be remembered and represented in their communities. Community archiving efforts, with and without institutional support, have always been around, but the rise of technology in our everyday lives has made it easier to make these archives available to a wider audience and for people to discover them organically or through recommendations, either by someone they know or electronically.

Platforms such as Omeka and WordPress have made sharing materials from community scanning events easier and allows those leading the effort to implement feedback on arrangement or metadata without having to go through bureaucracy. Technology also allows opportunities for these community archivists and advocates to connect with the community they are documenting and develop unique outcomes and projects institutions can learn from, such as the case of San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum (SAAACAM)16 and their partnership with the Southern Historical Collection (SHC) Community Driven Archives (CDA)17 project. In working together to start SAAACAM and have the local San Antonio community become involved, the SHC noted “historical erasures can only be remedied through full community control over one’s archives”18 and local partnerships would be more beneficial going forward to sustain the archives. Knowing when to step back and let a collaboration end is just as important as knowing when to start one.

---

Conclusion

Fleckner ends his address with a call for archivists to “face the future with humility and fearlessness” (p. 7), which is something I personally want on my office wall. Archival practice changed over the decades before Fleckner’s address and in the twenty years between the address and now, and it will continue to be modified in the future. Technology is not stable, and the rapid pace of technological development, from different types of connecting cables to the invention of file formats that are now obsolete, has shown us this. Being humble in our knowledge, willing to learn about new practices, and able to approach new technology from a place of curiosity and not fear is important. Some technologies that might affect the future of archives, near or far, are artificial intelligence, NFTs (non-fungible tokens), and the evolution of social media sites as people create new communities. How will we archive these new forms of digital objects? Should we archive them, and if we do, what safeguards can we put in place to protect ourselves from any legal moves should we need to? For example, ownership of NFTs, accidental copying of NFTs, or potential copyright and use issues with archived software are all legal issues that could arise in the future. These questions, along with the ones Fleckner poses in his last paragraph, are important to reflect on periodically to see how the profession’s approaches to our practices have changed over time. We can also use these questions to create new ways to reflect and integrate our findings at a core values level, personal or professional.

Overall, Fleckner presents a hopeful view of the archival profession’s future in 2000. While most of his predictions have come true, I think our society has not yet reached his full vision of where we might have been in the year 2023. Despite jokes about robots soon replacing humans, I believe archivists will remain irreplaceable. This profession has a certain heart because the people in it care so deeply about their work, the preservation of history, and capturing as many voices that make up the human experience as possible. Although archivists may preserve different materials now than when Fleckner gave his address, the heart of the profession remains, and both are worth fighting for.