Building Bridges between Past and Future: Reflections on John Fleckner's “The Paradox of Change and Continuity”

Review of John Fleckner's speech “The Paradox of Change and Continuity.” Dedication of Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University, 1994.

By Amanda Greenwood, Bigelow Project Archivist, Union College

Dedicated to the Special Collections and University Archives at Rutgers University, John Fleckner's 1994 speech “The Paradox of Change and Continuity” presents a thought-provoking exploration of the future of archives. Fleckner explores the tension and interplay between two opposing forces: change and continuity. He suggests that while change is inevitable and necessary for progress and growth, continuity and stability are also vital for maintaining identity and coherence. Through perspicacity and prescience, Fleckner urges his audience to envision transformations that may occur within archival practices and institutions. He adeptly highlights the tension between embracing change while maintaining continuity, which becomes increasingly relevant as the archival landscape continues to evolve. Although contemporary readers may not have attended the live presentation, Fleckner’s construction of thought and word choice is compelling and continues to be relevant to the profession today.

Fleckner’s decision to use the word “change” is succinctly relevant to my experience as an archivist. As an emerging archives professional, this piece deeply resonates with my personal journey of navigating change and continuity. I have difficulty fighting off impostor syndrome and often face challenges embracing my new professional evolution while gradually letting go of my past career. Having spent the last fifteen years teaching literature in South Korea and the US, I have primarily experienced archives from a user perspective through my roles as a university lecturer and researcher. Nonetheless, by transitioning from a user to an information professional, I have become more aware of the intricacies and gratification inherent in the archival field.
Fleckner begins his speech by stating that continuity and permanence are “too fleeting” (p. 1); his musings about the ephemeral nature of the late twentieth century are even truer today as technological efforts in our profession have become more focused on capturing and preserving the ever-changing formats of social media and web content. By using these ephemeral, technical formats as evidence of change and continuity in our profession, Fleckner demonstrates examples of paradoxical elements that represent the permanence and significance of our field. At the center of this piece are questions about what we preserve in archives and how users access this information, as these concepts are "the very evidence of past change" (p. 2). Fleckner prompts us to contemplate how we can actively contribute to a better future through our work and proactively tackle challenges in our field. As the inevitable forces of change continuously shape the archival landscape, there is a lingering demand that archivists must adapt to the evolving practice of our field while preserving the present and past for future generations (p. 2). Fleckner highlights this dynamic nature through thoughtful examples, such as the discovery of clay tablets by archaeologists and the existence of ancient libraries (p. 2). These examples serve to remind readers that the care and management of collections require an iterative and ever-evolving approach that is intricately tied to the unique characteristics of the materials. Fleckner's overall point is this: we must adapt to changing technology, materials, and tools if we want to collect and preserve the change around us.

As history progresses, modern technology forces new archival practices, and Fleckner points out that the most obvious change in “geometrical growth” is the quantity of information (p. 2). This leads us to think of how we can adequately appraise and preserve information available to us. The demands for rapid access to, and communication of, information in our current society is most obvious in web content and applications. However, “in the era of the computer revolution, vast amounts of recorded information have no visible, physical or tangible existence at all” because digital technology has obviated past ways of recording data (p. 3). Moreover, the production of information begets the consumption of information (p. 3); quite simply, we do not have the funding, space, and dedicated staff members to collect it all. Fleckner states that in the times of early democratic jacqueries, collecting legal and business records were “essential to securing the rights of citizens” (p. 3). By the 1800s, personal records became primary source material for scholarship, and any person or group “lay claim to its right to tell the story of its past and to preserve the documentation of that story” (p. 3). With the creation of new records and formats in recorded information, there was a growing demand for preserving this information (p. 3). Fleckner explains that state historical societies were created prior to the establishment of state government archives; following that,

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universities adopted the responsibility of preserving cultural heritage on the state’s behalf; thus special collections and archives departments were born (p. 4). Preservation is still an essential element of our work, and despite the monumental task of recording and preserving information, our efforts are ongoing. While we acknowledge our responsibilities as archivists to be stewards of the collections we care for, we must also pivot to think about the paradox of change we are faced with as a profession.

Fleckner segues into five changes he believes have transformed our profession. First is the “proliferation of physical media in which information of historical significance is now embedded” (p. 4). History, once solely recorded in various paper formats, is now increasingly recorded in born-digital formats (p. 5); this allows us to offer researchers a clearer picture of the topics they explore through various multimedia. As technology encompasses programs and systems, how artificial intelligence\(^2\) fits into the future of our profession will continue to be an ongoing conversation. Experimental programs such as ChatGPT, or AI-powered platforms like Transkribus, are resources archivists can employ to improve our workflows, appraisal and selection, and metadata creation. In my position at Union College, I worked with Transkribus while supervising an undergraduate research fellow during a digital humanities summer program. We learned the program together, which was beneficial in weighing the positives and negatives of human-powered versus AI-powered transcription. The student learned that the program was helpful, but it required a lot of maintenance and management to achieve their desired results. Ten years after Fleckner delivered this speech, he was already thinking about the paradox of technology as it applies to our field,\(^3\) so I am curious what his response to AI technology is today.

Fleckner’s second change looks at “what constitutes history,” and he discusses how archivists work to emphasize underrepresented groups and unexplored topics in collections (p. 5). He states that “we demand a history that is far more inclusive of diverse cultures, interests, and perspectives” because people have an expectation that the records collected and made accessible by our special collections and archives will be reflective of their experience (p. 5). In the first twenty years since Fleckner delivered this speech, there seemed to be little progress on this front. However, in the past ten years, theories, practices, and scholarship in the areas of participatory and community archives,\(^4\) feminist


ethics, re reparative and conscious description, inclusive linked data vocabulary, responsible and ethical curation, and anti-racist frameworks have become the industry standard in a collective effort to dismantle the white supremacist, patriarchal views and bias this society has imposed in archives and libraries.

While Fleckner acknowledges the gaps in diversity and inclusion in our field, I think he may have underestimated how central these efforts would become to the profession. Fleckner reminds us of how permanence, continuity, and enduring value measure against the challenges we face in archives (pp. 6–7). As humans, we have a desire to apply these qualities to satisfy our need to understand our histories and ourselves. Most of the time we seek this on our own, but we also “want to locate ourselves in space and time” and see ourselves recognized in history (p. 7). Not all histories and selves have been represented or recognized in records, but contemporary trends in libraries and archives have been working to remedy that. While there is still a lot of work to accomplish, efforts in the areas of reparative and conscious description, building inclusive and diverse collections, and the push to promote accountability and social justice have helped to open discussions about ethical problems and inequality in our field. Because of past unethical collecting practices,
Fleckner hints that archivists will see a flawed reflection when we hold up the cracked looking glass in the future. As we are currently experiencing the future Fleckner hinted at, his acumen in recognizing that these issues would prove to be problematic is fascinating.

The third and most remarkable change, according to Fleckner, is that of online computer networks. When Fleckner delivered this dedication in 1994, the World Wide Web was in its nascent stages, and the Internet was expanding at a rapid pace. As users could now instantly access information from anywhere in the world, collection descriptions that were once written on library catalog cards or sheets of paper could now be found with the click of a button (p. 5). Access became more equitable as users no longer needed physical access to research collections. Today, archivists use Semantic Web technologies and rely on linked data to improve description, assist with research, control inventory, and expand discoverability and accessibility of digital collections. Union College recently acquired Archipelago, a flexible, customizable, open-source repository. My colleagues and I have used this tool to collaboratively create descriptive metadata to make our content more globally discoverable. In the collection I am currently working with, numerous correspondents are prominent historical figures with authorized name records. Union’s Archipelago instance, renamed ARCHES, allows users to discover our collections through linked data entities. Like Fleckner, I find working with this technology remarkable because I have only previously used linked data as a researcher.

The fourth transformation Fleckner observes affecting the culture of libraries and archives is the move away from an isolated environment to a collaborative one. According to Fleckner, networks, consortiums, cooperatives, virtual collections, professional standards, and documentation in libraries and archives have helped us share information and not covet it (p. 6). Interdepartmental collaborations both within and between institutions have allowed us to not only share our resources but also shrewdly utilize our collaborators’ different skillsets to accomplish projects and goals. However, the current problems with the “marginalization of archivists’ labor” has led to underpaid and overworked archivists taking on several roles meant for one person, so newly hired archivists often need to acquire a variety of skills to be competitive candidates. I have personally seen this issue of taking on extra work exacerbated in web archiving. The 2017 National Digital Stewardship Alliance survey reported that more than 50 percent of institutions dedicate only 0.25 FTE to web archives programs. This means archivists are completing main job responsibilities while adding web archiving to their required tasks. In a previous role, where I was managing more than thirty web archives collections in twenty hours a week, I was not able to maintain a sustainable program because of increasing maintenance load and scoping.

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Sadly, the complexities of the current job market perhaps suggest that the “cycle of poverty,” as it relates to archival labor, is something that will continue into the near future.

The fifth change lies in the management of special collections and archives. Modern society demands that our institutions be “managed more effectively, work more productively, and demonstrate their value more convincingly,” all while receiving less funding (p. 6). Those who manage archives make budgetary decisions that can be transformational to an organization, and these decisions need to show those who support archives that we contribute significantly to our institutions and are worth the funding. Fleckner reminds us that we must “identify and make common cause with those friends and supporters” to accomplish this (p. 6). As someone who has worked in a historical house museum, a large state university library, a public library, and a small, private, liberal arts library, the common theme amongst all these institutions is that the organization must constantly prove its worth to its surrounding community. While this is no surprise to anyone in the archives field, the constant and exhausting struggle to convince others of our worth is reason enough for many archivists to leave the field.18 Perhaps some of the problem has its origins in graduate school programs producing too many archivists for far too few positions, mixed with the aforementioned problem of the competitive job market.

These five changes in our field may be challenging, but Fleckner encourages his audience to think about how archivists have endured through time because we have focused on preserving the historical record. Our dedication to preservation has encouraged others to take educational advantage of primary sources found in special collections and archives; teachers who work in all levels of education have always recognized the potential of using historical documents (p. 7). He also predicts that the promise of modern technologies will create many more opportunities for teaching and learning, but they will be complex. Fleckner concludes by reminding the audience that all the changes and transformations to the format of the historical record, and how we steward it as a profession, reflect the fact that we preserve these records for their enduring values (p. 9). All that we do now is to maintain a legacy for posterity. However, how do archivists understand the paradox of change and continuity in our profession? One way is to acknowledge that change is necessary and beneficial but also presents new challenges and problems.

If Fleckner were to present these comments today, he might have further revisions or additions. One major change I think Fleckner may have not considered is how our profession impacts the environment, and vice versa. As the leading expert on the

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intersection of archives, the environment, and climate change, Eira Tansey’s research has significantly contributed to a major area of scholarship in our field. Tansey’s latest research often focuses on archives in the Anthropocene and raises questions such as:

How have material resources shaped our world and the objects we use? Does our future consist of climate chaos, or will it be the fulcrum on which humans reintegrate into a healthier relationship with our non-human kin? And how do local communities provide a foundation on which to weather a global problem?

These questions, when considered through the lens of archival work and combined with modern technology, require further rumination about how we can continue to advance our profession without doing further environmental damage or, at the very least, lessen the negative impact our profession has on the environment.

Additionally, if given the chance to give this speech again, I think Fleckner would focus more on the technology archivists employ today. He acknowledges his astonishment that technology such as online networks has “come upon us so quickly” and that he can “barely glimpse its full ramifications” (p. 5); his sentiments lead me to believe that a more modern version of this speech would be rich with both praise and damnation of the tools, programs, and systems we use. However, I am afraid that because of the speed with which society is advancing technologically, he may yet again state that we are only glimpsing the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Throughout Fleckner’s speech, his energy is joyful and hopeful, reflecting on the past to understand the present. As he marvels at the future of archives, the paradox becomes less of a contradictory situation and more of a deep exploration and contemplation into where archivists’ strengths lie. While there is undoubtedly tension between the need for transformation and the desire for endurance, Fleckner emphasizes the importance of finding a balance between these two forces to foster progress, innovation, and adaptation in our work while preserving our core values and ethics. As a newer archives professional, this article is inspiring and teaches me to be more accepting of change, more thoughtful about permanence, more forgiving of myself, and more hopeful of where the future of the field will take me.
