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Presidential Address--A Time to Reach Out

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A Time to Reach Out

Dennis M. Conrad

There is a Chinese curse that goes: “May you live in interesting times.” Well, this organization and documentary editing in general seem always to live in “interesting times,” and this year has proved no exception. Through the course of it, I noticed I had lost some weight. One day, while admiring my new Adonis-like physique, it occurred to me that most documentary editors are on the thinnish side. (Now Records people, on the other hand . . . ) I wondered how it was that editors, who all of you must admit, are as desk-bound a group as can be found, achieved such remarkable weight control. Then I came across the latest pronouncement of the Surgeon General about Americans and fitness. It seems they have discovered that some of the activities that editors specialize in consume significant calories.

Stretching a dollar—something all editors do very, very well—burns approximately 75 calories per hour; swallowing your pride, 50; and when done for funders and university deans it jumps to 100; pushing your luck burns 250; making mountains out of molehills, especially in grant proposals, 500; running around in circles—a favorite activity of editors—burns 350 calories per hour, and bending over backwards to meet the unrealistic expectations of others, nets a burn of 175 calories. So cheer up fellow editors—our funding may remain forever “soft,” but our abs will be rock hard.

I use this anecdote as an introduction because I am about to recommend another editorial aerobic exercise—juggling your overcrowded schedule to add yet another responsibility. But I hope that I can demonstrate to you that the effort is worth the cost many times over. I will introduce it by harkening back to an earlier Presidential address. John Kaminski in his fine and thoughtful Presidential address delivered in 1989 and reprinted in the Twenty-fifth anniversary issue of Documentary Editing, advocated the need for editors to disseminate through other publications the knowledge they had accumulated preparing their documentary editions. John was prescient in anticipating that the work of editors would be valuable and well-received when presented in a less daunting format than documentary editions, but unfortunately it was not editors—save a few who function well without sleep—who “cashed in.”
In a recent review, historian Pauline Maier wrote: “Why are books on the American Revolution so popular? Some have suggested that Americans now worried about the state of the nation like to read about a time when ‘we had it right.’ The truth may be simpler: The easy availability of modern, comprehensive editions of the papers of the Founding Fathers has allowed good writers without extensive historical training to write intelligent, readable books for broad audiences. Historians with strong storytelling skills also depend on modern editions of the founding fathers’ papers.”

As an exercise in making the audience feel good about itself, I will quote another small portion of Maier’s review. She went on to write, “The people who know the subject best—the scholars’ scholars of our time—are the editors who spend day after day and year after year copying and arranging those documents, adding introductions to explain their contexts and notes to identify obscure references.”¹ I should add that Maier then proceeded to laud *General George Washington: A Military Life*, a biography produced by one of our own, Ed Lengel. And yes, I expect a free copy of the book for this commercial endorsement.

As Maier indicates, a veritable cottage industry has developed composed of journalists and historians who are mining our editions and turning out very popular and, for them, very lucrative biographies. It became a mantra of mine as we talked with congressional staffers during this year’s National Historical Publications and Record Commission (NHPRC) funding crisis. No, documentary editions do not sell huge numbers of volumes, but yes, they are hugely popular. We in documentary editing can mimic a well-known television advertising slogan: we do not make the products that you know, but we do make the products that you know much, much better—and we make them possible.

To again reference the language of commerce, I think we have lost out on the high-end market; I am here to advocate that we do not similarly concede the “mass” market. Specifically, I am asking that the members of ADE make a conscious and concerted effort to reach out to teachers and students in middle school and high school to make sure they are exposed to the wonderful work that editors do.

I know that what we produce would be well received if delivered in a format that is accessible to students and teachers. I taught high school once long ago and am married to someone who has taught at both the high school and

middle school levels for over thirty years and we have both seen how exposure to primary source materials, especially in this day of textbook-driven pedagogy, can make history fun, exciting, and accessible for students. I will relate one anecdote that I assure you is the rule and not the exception. My wife requires a research paper of her tenth-grade European history students. She gives the students a list of characters and asks them to choose one and to study his or her life and career to answer the question: did that person change the course of history or were they merely the product of historical forces beyond their control? Last year, one of her students chose Jeanne d'Arc as her research topic and, typically, began looking into the relevant secondary sources the subject. The student was totally unexcited and uninspired and her level of commitment to the project and her attitude and conduct in class reflected her boredom, that is until she happened across a series of letters written by a contemporary of Jeanne's, translated into English and transcribed by a scholar and posted on the internet. Suddenly, Jeanne d'Arc became a real person to this student; she could connect with her on a human level. The result was that this student went from failing in the exercise to doing good and sophisticated historical analysis—the critical thinking skills educators tout as so necessary for today's students—thanks to her exposure to primary documentary material.

That was the "micro" approach; now the "macro" approach to prove the importance of editors becoming involved in providing resources for pre-college students. First, the most popular single textbook in American history courses at the college level is Discovering the American Past, a problems series textbook that combines primary source materials with historical analysis and open-ended discussion questions. The publishers have also designed a textbook using a similar format for European and World History courses.

Second, the growing importance and dominance of Advanced Placement courses in high schools. My youngest child is in his last year of high school so I have had the privilege of visiting a number of college campuses recently. Without exception, the admissions' officers in their presentations informed the potential applicants that the single most important factor in determining whether they were admitted to such and such a school was the quality of their high school record, and particularly the number of honors and AP courses they had taken and how they had performed in those courses and on the Advanced Placement examination.

Given this, the number of students taking AP courses—which has grown dramatically in the last few years—will continue to grow at an extraordinary
rate. As most of you know, the centerpiece of the Advanced Placement test is the DBQ or document based question, which asks students to analyze original documents and posit an answer to a question based on that analysis. Our "product" therefore has become the centerpiece of most high-level high school history courses.

The other feature of many such honors courses is the traditional research paper. Because students can easily obtain already-written research papers on the web, teachers are looking for ways to teach the skills of researching and analyzing a topic without having to spend their time using spyware to insure that the paper they were handed is the student's own work. Again, with some tailoring, our projects can be the means for teachers to achieve both of these goals.

Now, having hopefully convinced you that there is a need and a market for documentary materials in the pre-college classroom, I turn to why it is in your enlightened self-interest to get involved. First, it furthers the goal that every editor shares of having as many people as possible learn more about the historical personalities and topics that our documentary editions illuminate. Second, it helps to create an educated and sophisticated audience for our work. Third, it resonates with funders, both in the halls of Congress and in the boardrooms of foundations. During the briefings given to the participants in Humanities Advocacy Day, I was struck at the emphasis speakers, especially those from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), gave to the connection between their programs and pre-college education. The NEH speakers spent almost all of their allotted time in the briefing session discussing and marketing the "We the People" initiative in those terms. That impression was only strengthened when I visited the offices of six different members of Congress. In each there was a visible heightening of interest when someone in the advocacy group launched into a discussion of how increased funding for the NEH or the NHPRC advanced the cause of education in the humanities among high school students.

Additional evidence for this concern among lawmakers for improved history education is that in this tight fiscal environment, two initiatives to improve history education have been funded and one of these, the Teaching American History initiative—which has the support of the current administration—contains an "Our Documents" program. Given this interest in Congress, it behooves the documentary editing community to get involved in producing materials for the pre-college education market. Rest assured, in this tight fiscal environment, other less competent groups will step in to attempt it, if we do not.

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The problem is that it takes time to work with teachers and education specialists, to design the best and most useable materials for middle and high school students, to produce those materials, to track their use and effectiveness, and finally to revise the product to address shortcomings or to add to it so that it remains fresh and useable. While funding agencies tout how important their programs and products are in addressing the nation’s educational needs, there is a perception among editors that the agencies are reluctant to have editing projects take time away from producing letter-press, microfilm, or electronic editions to produce ancillary materials dedicated to the education market. The feeling among several editors with whom I have spoken is that the agencies agree it is vital work yet expect projects and editors, if they engage in that work, to do it on their own time.

The time is ripe to rethink this issue.

The NHPRC and NEH should make clear policy statements on this matter. If they believe their own rhetoric, then they should allow projects to set aside time during each funding cycle to create and promote “educational” materials. Moreover, those agencies should actively help projects create such materials. In particular, they could facilitate interaction between educators, editors, and librarians by sponsoring conferences and workshops involving those groups so editors could learn how best to tailor their materials and teachers and librarians could be exposed to the breadth and depth of what materials are and could be available.

Finally, the NEH and NHPRC ought to, I believe, look to create a central clearing house for such an effort akin to the steps NHPRC has taken to create such a clearing house for producing editions in an electronic environment. In fact, I consider this education component to be the first step toward creating “mass” electronic editions. Just producing electronic editions means that only the very few will understand how best to make use of them. To introduce the current generation of students to documents, educate them in their use, including fostering the critical thinking skills that dealing with primary document materials promotes, is to create a significant body of long-term, sophisticated users.

The ADE, too, should get involved. First let me acknowledge that some ADE projects have already created first-rate materials for middle and high school age students so that editors thinking of doing so would not be moving into uncharted waters. These projects are listed at the ADE website under the heading “Classroom Projects.” I suggest you go there and click on the offerings listed and check out what kinds of things are being done.
I particularly want to mention the Freedman and Southern Society Project and the Emma Goldman Papers, both of which have created short book-length abridgements of their larger works centered on a theme. In the case of the Freedman Project it was the African-American experience, to quote the subtitle, in “Slavery, Freedom, and the Civil War.” In the case of the Goldman Papers it centered on the question of Free Speech and First Amendment Rights. In the latter case, Candace Falk and her staff worked closely with teachers and curriculum developers to make it classroom friendly. Both projects then followed publication of their books to create imaginative websites that have garnered excellent reviews and good responses from teachers and students. I commend both of them to you as models. But I think the ADE can do more and do it in a collaborative fashion.

Some years ago Mary Gallagher proposed a project in which several ADE projects would contribute documents on a specific topic that would be grouped and published for classroom use. I thought it was a good idea then, and now, with the possibility of using the web as a delivery system, I think it is an even better idea. I know there are some individual projects, such as the Constitutional Sources Project, that are exploring the possibility of such an approach now but I think with the wide array of projects associated with the ADE, we have a remarkable opportunity to create interesting and compelling treatments of broad topics, such as Freedom, Dissent, Revolution, to name a few, or treatments for periods and topics such as Nineteenth Century Reform, Native Americans, the Spanish Experience in the present-day U.S. West, or Transcendentalism and Nature—again, to name just a few possibilities. These compilations could, with skillful promotion, become the centerpiece for high school American history and literature classes. Teachers are looking for original materials to engage their students and make the textbook come alive; we could provide those materials.

Now is the time to embark on such a project and turn our projects into “teaching opportunities.” One element of the new proposed partnership arrangement between the ADE and the New York Historical Society is the creation of a unit on documentary editing for high school students who serve as interns for the New-York Historical Society. ADE has begun to work closely with Richard Gilder whose Gilder-Lehrman Foundation is the sponsor of History Now, American History Online, a website designed to make history, and particularly history focused on primary documentary materials, more accessible for the pre-college teacher and student. ADE has also begun
to develop a closer relationship with National History Day, which has been identified in the new American History and Civics Education Act as a model for history instruction and had its programs singled out for funding by government grants.

The stars are rightly aligned. It is the time for we editors to become a force in developing instructional materials based on the incredibly rich resources we work with every day so that fifteen years hence another ADE President is not before you discussing the cottage industry of curriculum planners and textbook authors who have mined our documentary editions to create a wave of hugely popular middle school and high-school educational materials.

So emulating another “Education President,” I saddle you with an unfunded mandate, I create an assessment criterion that I expect all of you to successfully pass or face dire consequences, and I pledge to you... no editor shall be left behind. Thank you.