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Presidential Address--Why Documentary Editing Matters

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Wisconsin Historical Society

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Why Documentary Editing Matters

Michael E. Stevens

Anglican Bishop N. T. Wright of Durham, England, tells the story of “a scholar who wrote scathing reviews of his colleagues’ work, then started going to conferences and met the people he was reviewing and discovered he really liked them—so he stopped going to conferences.”¹ Fortunately, that’s not the case with the ADE. Twenty-nine years ago, I attended the first annual meeting of the ADE held in Princeton, New Jersey. I liked the people, I don’t write scathing reviews, and I’m still coming back.

The title of my talk tonight is “Why Documentary Editing Matters.” The question I seek to answer is critical, especially in an era that has seen rapid change in how we make information accessible. We need to know the answer to the question in order to explain our work to funders. But we also must also explain to ourselves why we choose to dedicate our energies to this endeavor. The significance of what we do is not based on how we publish our work, but in the value we add.

Have you ever had the problem of trying to explain what it is that you do? Have you ever mentioned documentary editing and heard in reply, “Oh, I just love Ken Burns’s work. How do you go about picking what music goes with the images?” Then, after you explain that you publish historical or literary documents, you either get an awkward silence, or perhaps you might get the response, “so what’s so hard about that? Why don’t you just copy it down?” Or “isn’t all that stuff on the web? Just scan it and put it up there.” You and I know that’s a gross simplification. But we’re often adrift in trying to explain what we do and why it matters.

The work we do helps transmit our cultural heritage from one generation to the next and is part of a long-standing tradition. Western civilization, a culture rooted in writing, placed a premium on the transmission of knowledge

¹ “N.T. Wright Responds to Richard John Neuhaus,” *First Things*, June/July 2008. http://www.first-things.com/article.php?id_article=6253. Accessed June 30, 2008

through reliable texts, most notably the Bible. Much of the cultural and political history of Europe depended on documents that became widely available, whether copied by hand or reproduced by moveable type. The new American nation, in the process of building a national identity, needed its own sacred texts. Even before the Revolution was won, Ebenezer Hazard sought federal funding of an edition of the *American State Papers*. At the state level, historical societies developed. Jeremy Belknap founded the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791, and soon thereafter it began to publish editions of historical documents. The first chair in American History at Harvard went to Jared Sparks, a man who made his fame not from narrative or interpretive history but from the publication of historical editions. In each of these cases, documentary editors (whether called scribes, medieval monks, or early historians) made important distinctions between those exceptional documents that needed the value they added and those that did not.

Too often we quote Thomas Jefferson's appeal for the "multiplication of copies" in the justification of our work.² While Jefferson's call for editions of important documents is lyrical, it makes us sound as if we are human photocopying machines. Instead, I would argue that we need a new way of expressing what we do. As documentary editors, we bring three kinds of value to our editions, which can be expressed as three assertions that documentary editors make. Regardless of what kind of edition we work on, we assert, first, "this document is important"; second, "this text is accurate"; and third, "this text comes from a different era or culture, and you need to know the context to understand it."

Each of these three assertions flows from the skills we bring to our work in selection, verification, and explication. The advent of the computer does not change this, and these tasks are independent of the means by which the documents are presented. They existed in the pre-printing press era when monks in monasteries were the means of producing editions, they are practiced in the era of the book, and they are even more important in the era of the web. Let us take a close look at each of these assertions.

First, "this document is important" or, as we call it, selection.

Documentary editors of all eras made choices about what documents of exceptional importance needed to be treated in a special fashion. In making those choices, they made cultural statements that these particular documents were significant. They are important enough to warrant more detailed treatment. They are important enough to read over and over again. And they are important enough to devote part of one's career to making them available. This has been a

² Thomas Jefferson to Ebenezer Hazard, Feb. 18, 1791, in Julian P. Boyd et al., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton, 1950–), Vol. 19, p. 287.

constant. No matter the technology, there was always more material to present than the resources available. Medieval monasteries were limited by the number of literate scribes available. We know many ancient works only by title, since they did not meet the criterion of significance to warrant the making of multiple copies. Book editors were limited by the cost of putting material in print. In the electronic era, the limits are different, but equally real. The costs are not those of paper or space, but rather in the time of the user. In an era of such abundance, the role of the editor as selector is important. The editor points to texts, asserts with authority that these are important, and proclaims “read them.” The editor becomes an advocate or, if you will, a marketing agent for a set of documents. And that role has important cultural significance, especially in modern society when there are so many things competing for our attention.

Our second assertion is “this text is accurate,” and the related skill is the act of verifying authenticity. Here, we must think about two kinds of authenticity. One is the expertise that the editor brings to the work in discerning and determining what are genuine documents. Forgeries have always existed, but their ubiquity on the web and the ease by which they can be circulated is astounding. Few people have either the knowledge or the time to distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic. Documentary editors play an important role in distinguishing the real from the forgeries. Two examples pulled from the internet come to mind. In 1934, an anti-Semitic group in North Carolina published the text of a speech allegedly made by Benjamin Franklin in the Constitutional Convention calling for the exclusion of Jews from the United States. The notes were supposedly taken down by Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, although some versions say it was Charles Pinckney. The story also claims that it was taken from a Pinckney diary in the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. Even though there is no extant manuscript and even though the hoax has been thoroughly discredited, it continues to circulate.³ It has recently appeared in Arab newspapers, and a Google search generates thousands of sites where it can be found.

Likewise, an internet search will turn up many examples of a document allegedly written by James Madison in which he supposedly argues that the U.S. government is based upon the Ten Commandments. The quote first appeared in 1939 and has been widely circulated by Rush Limbaugh and inserted into the *Congressional Record* by Representative Bill Dannemeyer of California. John Stagg and David Mattern of the *Papers of James Madison* played a significant role

³ The Franklin Prophecy: Modern Anti-Semitic Myth Making, Anti-Defamation League. http://www.adl.org/special_reports/franklin_prophecy/print.asp. Accessed October 20, 2008. Also see Claude-Anne Lopez, “Prophet and Loss,” *The New Republic*, January 7, 1997.

in debunking this myth, although one can find numerous references to this fictitious document on the Internet.⁴

The other skill related to authenticity is the work we do to ensure the accurate transcription of legitimate texts. Again, the Internet makes what we do more important. Pick any important document, you will find multiple versions of the text online. One can do textual criticism in which one follows corruptions in the text from version to version. The difference now is that changes that once took decades now appear in days.

In the May 28, 2007, issue of *The New Yorker*, staff writer Adam Gopnik offered an insightful essay about Abraham Lincoln's language.⁵ Other than the Declaration of Independence, probably no other document in American history has more iconic status than the Gettysburg Address. As Gopnik notes, the address not only exists in written form, but is significant as the oral address that was delivered in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on November 19, 1863. What Lincoln actually said matters. Gopnik's essay notes the substantive variations in accounts of what people heard at the time. Lincoln's phrase "conceived in liberty" became "consecrated to liberty" in some accounts. Many listeners heard Lincoln say "This nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom," though as Gopnik points out that "under God" does not appear in the drafts in Lincoln's hand. Did Lincoln insert it in his oral remarks?

Gopnik goes on to discuss variations in other well-known statements surrounding Lincoln, such as Secretary of War Edwin Stanton's famous quote on Lincoln's death, "Now he belongs to the Ages." This has become the accepted version of Stanton's remarks. Yet the first documented source says "Now he belongs to the Angels." His point is that accuracy and authenticity do matter. Documentary editors, more than anyone else, help sort these things out.

Our final editorial assertion is "This text comes from a different era, and you need to know the context to understand it." Language and cultural assumptions change over time. To make sense out of important documents, readers sometimes need to have context set for them. Once again, this is not a new function and this skill does not rely on the media or form. Interpretive glosses on texts were an important part of medieval scholarship just as annotation is important today. Readers still need the explication of texts to make sense out of them. This was brought out in a session at our annual meeting in Richmond last fall entitled "If you have to explain it, is it still funny?"⁶

⁴ Robert S. Alley, "Public Education and the Public Good," *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal*, Vol. 4 (Summer, 1995), pp. 316–18.

⁵ Adam Gopnik, "Angels and Ages: Lincoln's Language and Its Legacy," *The New Yorker*, May 28, 2007, pp. 30–37.

⁶ See Beth Luey, "If You Have to Explain It, Is It Still Funny?," *Documentary Editing*, Vol. 30 (Spring/Summer 2008), pp. 3–7.

Often, a document without explanation is useless. In my edition of the letters of Socialist Congressman Victor Berger, his wife Meta wrote to him “did the flapjacks taste good? And was it worth while and interesting? Sometimes celebrities are criticized severely of partaking of syrup and & cakes, especially Vermont syrup.”⁷ Why did she write the note about eating pancakes? And why would anyone be criticized for eating Vermont maple syrup? And why did Stevens select this document for inclusion? With the annotation, we learn that Berger accepted an invitation to a breakfast meeting with President Calvin Coolidge of Vermont, and Meta was fearful that Berger would be criticized by his Socialist comrades back home for having a private breakfast with the Republican president.

In other cases, a little knowledge can be dangerous and give readers, even well-informed readers, a distorted sense of the meaning of the text. As historians know, the Ku Klux Klan was influential in the Midwest in the 1920s. Thus, it wasn’t surprising to find a seeming reference in one of Meta’s letters. She reported that there was speculation in Congressional offices about her possible candidacy for the U.S. Senate. She dismissed the likelihood of success, saying that the Wisconsin German farmer “is anti woman in everything except the three K.K.K.”⁸ How should one make sense out of this seeming reference to the Klan? But annotation will tell the reader that this is a reference to *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* (Children, Church, Kitchen). In other words, Wisconsin farmers believed that a woman’s place is in the home, not in the Congress.

The skills that we bring to our work contribute to a cultural outcome: namely, that we have authentic, accurate, and understandable historical texts, which have long cultural resonance. Not all texts require the detailed attention we provide to some documents, but for those that do require it, our work is indispensable.

We often use the long-term value of the editions as an argument for our work, but let me suggest that there are other more immediate values in having accurate, historical texts that are easily available by telling you two stories that go well beyond the academy.

The first is the story of Atira. Atira was a thirteen-year-old African American student in Wisconsin who did a National History Day project on a former slave named James L. Smith. Smith escaped from slavery, received an education, and became a Methodist preacher. Late in life, Smith wrote a memoir, which has been reprinted in a modern edition. Atira took that text and used it as the basis of her project. During the judging cycle, I asked her what she

⁷ Michael E. Stevens and Ellen D. Goldlust-Gingrich, eds., *The Family Letters of Victor and Meta Berger, 1894–1929* (Madison, 1995), pp. 388–89.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

learned from it and she told me, “I never knew it was illegal to teach someone to read who looked like me. I owe it to him to pay attention in school.” Only because the text was available in a modern edition was that possible. It made a difference.

The second story deals with a Vietnam veteran from Milwaukee named John. John served as an infantryman in Vietnam in 1970 and 1971, and some of his letters appear in a book I edited entitled *Voices from Vietnam*.⁹ John delivered the following remarks at a book event. He wrote:

Back in June, my wife and I were attending a military reunion in Washington, DC. One of the things I wanted to do was to leave a copy of our book, *Voices from Vietnam* at the Wall. I had made copies of letters from the book for the men who had died in Vietnam. We went early on Saturday morning to leave the letters by the individual names on the Wall.

Our desire was to let the fallen soldiers have a chance to speak again. So people could understand these names on the Wall were just people, regular everyday people, who had feelings, emotions, and thoughts like everybody else. Individuals who had come from all walks of life, who had died serving the country they loved so much. On June 30th, 1996, these Wisconsin veterans who had died on the battlefield became real people again; with thoughts, feelings, and emotions, not just names on a Wall. The letters became their Voices from Vietnam.

I cannot describe the beautiful sight my wife and I observed watching the groups of people take the time and effort to read about our fallen veterans whose names were on the wall. On that day these veterans were alive again, their voices speaking as if their lives were never shortened by war. . . .

The importance of what we do is not defined by how we publish; it is the value we add to our already valuable documentary heritage. Why does documentary editing matter? Listen closely to the voices of Atira and John. Their words will give you the answer.

⁹ Michael E. Stevens et al., eds. *Voices from Vietnam* (Madison, 1996).