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2009

President's Letter 2008: Moving Forward

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Stevens, Michael E., "President's Letter 2008: Moving Forward" (2009). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 77.

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Michael E. Stevens

This past summer, the ADE's Planning Committee met in Madison for three days to discuss the Association's future. The group had previously developed background papers, and while in Madison they built on that work. The conversations were stimulating, and participants' opinions changed as the pros and cons of different ideas were weighed. In the end, the group agreed upon a strategic direction and an action plan for the Association. The plan is printed elsewhere in this issue as well as at www.documentaryhistory.org. I urge you to give it a close read and to think about ways you might want to volunteer your services to help implement it. There's plenty of work to be done, and I hope to involve as many members as possible in building this organization so that we don't ask too much of any one member.

The discussions themselves reminded me why I value the ADE so highly. Much like the annual meeting, there was a lot of intellectual firepower in the room, and people weren't afraid to disagree, nor were they

afraid to change their position after hearing others speak on issues. The work was done in the ADE-way—in a congenial and friendly fashion (with plenty of good food and camaraderie).

We had honest, introspective looks at our strengths and weaknesses as well as impending threats and opportunities. The ADE has not always kept up with the times in terms of communicating with its members. At one time, *Documentary Editing* and its predecessor, *The ADE Newsletter*, were the vehicles of choice for communications. Today, things change extraordinarily quickly, and while SEDIT-L plays an important part in speeding communications, the ADE's lack of its own electronic newsletter is problematic. The small, collegial size of the organization is a benefit, but it also means that we are always calling on already stretched members to do yet another thing. That problem is exacerbated by the ADE not having paid staff, which can lead to a lack of continuity. As our membership gets older, we need to focus on succession planning. Some note that the very name "the Association for Documentary Editing" confuses the public. Mention the name of the organization to someone outside of our group, and nine times out of ten you will hear "yes, I love those Ken Burns films."

At the same time, we reminded ourselves of the many strengths of the ADE. It is made up of good, committed members who feel passionate about what they do. It has helped develop best practices among documentary editors, sponsored a guide that's now in its third edition, and built a useful website. The annual meeting succeeds each year as a place for members to network and learn new things about our discipline. Beth Luey, one of

the participants in the retreat, asked us to imagine a world without the ADE as a way to remind us how productive our small organization has been. Without it, it's likely that the NHRPC would have disappeared a quarter century ago. It's created a network of good people who help each other and treat each other as colleagues. And it's survived.

As noted in the plan narrative, "Too many plans have become 'credenza art,' serving only to decorate shelves." That's why we agreed to invest little in fancy formatting, but instead created a clear, practical, and flexible document. The plan is designed to be changed regularly, just as the Association needs to constantly change with the times. However, to make it work, it will require self-discipline. The question facing the ADE is no longer whether an idea is good or not, but rather is it one of the most important things we need to do to further accomplish our mission? Given all the important things that are on our plate, we need to keep our focus on the most critical things we must do to ensure the survival of the ADE and the field of documentary editing.

At our meeting, we identified long-term goals and objectives and quickly came to a consensus about the critical challenges we face. In the coming year, the Association needs to improve its communications, infrastructure, advocacy, and financial health. In addition, we will need to work toward an increased and more varied membership and a strong education program.

These goals are not designed to be achieved in one or two years, but will serve as a guide for several years to come. We immediately identified action steps and put small groups to work. In the area of communications, we agreed that rather than putting all

our resources into a quarterly journal, we would turn *Documentary Editing* into an annual starting in 2009 and institute an electronic newsletter. The need for fast, up-to-date communication with our members has been missing, and we hope that the new e-newsletter will address that concern.

We also will be setting up a system of liaisons with other professional organizations and develop a method of gathering information about members to allow us to better serve your needs and get information back to you as needed. Given the ADE's short terms of office and its all-volunteer nature, we have to work harder to establish continuity between administrations and will develop and maintain manuals for each office and committee to ensure a smooth transition of critical information. By using the action plan as its agenda, the Council and Planning Committee will ensure that the ADE continues to identify and complete the tasks that are most important. A committee will explore the question of whether the ADE should have or can afford a paid staff member. Advocacy is an important part of what the ADE does, and for too long too much of the work has fallen on the shoulders of just a few people. Over the next year, we will work to broaden involvement and identify ways that everyone can participate.

Finally, we will study the dues structure and encourage members to join at a higher level. Adjusted for inflation, today's ADE dues are at half the rate they were in 1978. We've also had a very generous offer from a past ADE president (who wishes to remain anonymous). This past president will match the membership dues in the form of a gift to the ADE for the first ten persons who upgrade their membership to the \$100 level for the first time. I thank this former ADE

president for a generous offer.

Generosity like this, as well as the willingness of ADE members to give of their expertise, is among the reasons why I continue to belong to and support the ADE. It has been a pleasure to serve as your president

during this past year, and I thank you for honoring me with the post. I look forward to turning the role over to your very capable new president, Cathy Moran Hajo, and to assist her as she continues to move the ADE forward.