

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)


Documentary Editing, Association for

1982

Historical Editing: The Federal Role

Simone Reagor
Harvard University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

Reagor, Simone, "Historical Editing: The Federal Role" (1982). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 170.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/170>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Historical Editing: The Federal Role

SIMONE REAGOR*

As a discipline history compels our attention because of its power to help us understand the present, and, thereby, to influence the shape of the future. The historian, whether consciously so or not, shapes the future while in the very process of reflecting upon the past. Historical documents provide the raw materials with which that shaping is done. They are the unsculpted base to which scholars and teachers apply their theories, their knowledge, and their biases. Historical documents are our primary cultural carriers; they are the records of the past that carry, like genes, possibilities for the future.

But what are the factors determining whether documents are saved to be used by historians, to become cultural carriers? In many instances, documents are initially preserved because it is thought they may have a further use related to their original purpose, as is often the case with legal records. At another level, many documents are saved by accident; materials are just tucked away and forgotten. But eventually, at some point in the chronology of an historical document's development, someone makes a judgment. At some point, someone decides, "This document is important because it may say something about the past that should be carried into the future." At that point, a cultural carrier has been consciously brought into being.

This process by which people make decisions turning written materials into cultural carriers goes on when materials are deposited in libraries and archives. It becomes an even more refined process at the later stage when materials are selected for documentary editions. Editors then exercise power in creating cultural carriers both through what they choose to annotate and through what they say. In today's world funders are also part of this process, for when granting organizations select editorial projects for financial support they are participating in the creation of cultural carriers.

At every stage in this process decisions are influenced by social and political factors, including class and gender roles. In my explorations of American cultural history, particularly in examining the development of the institutions and resources that are the infrastructure of that cul-

ture, I have become increasingly conscious of the way social and political factors shape these institutions and resources. Every scholarly project, including historical editions, is shaped to some degree by these elements.

When I began work on this paper, I started from the assumption that I would discover a range of arguments to justify continued federal funding for documentary editing through the powers of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission structured much as we have come to know it. My effort to think through this question has, instead, brought me to quite another position. Whatever options we may now have about federal funding, I no longer believe that we should replicate what we have had before. I do not believe it is wise to continue funding for historical editing through the commission under the guidelines of the past.

Before offering my version of what I think a more appropriate role for the federal government would be, I would like to examine the past. Historical editing as a modern academic pursuit came into being over the past three decades in the wake of the Founding Fathers projects, which largely because of the scholarly and political efforts of Julian Boyd were able to win government attention and then financial support from both the private sector, through the Ford Foundation, and from the federal government, through the commission.

The figures for what has been accomplished in this period are impressive. By 1979 the NHPRC had spent over \$13,000,000 and had generated an additional \$18,000,000 or so from private sources.¹ In terms of numbers of projects, the 1979 annual report of the commission indicates that the agency had as of that date supported 83 book editions and 149 microform editions. That is a great deal of historical editing in so short a time.

Unquestionably, this field takes its present shape from the work, politics, and funding that had been generated by the commission. The commission's growing influence over the past 30 years developed because its powers were increased in several ways.

First, the basic powers of the commission were expanded significantly. After President Harry Truman's strong endorsement of Boyd's Jefferson edition in 1950, the commission received a mandate to encourage, advise upon, and support the development of documentary editing. For more than a decade the agency shaped and nurtured documentary editing both inside and outside the federal government through its role as an advocate. Then in 1964 the commission won the additional legislative authority and an appropriation from Congress with

* Simone Reagor is head of sponsored research at Harvard University. This paper is a shortened version of a paper delivered at a session on documentary editing at the Society of American Archivists meeting in Berkeley in September 1981. Although Reagor was co-author with Henry Graff of a recent study for the NHPRC on historical editing, these remarks are not to be associated with that report. Comments by John Y. Simon, who chaired the panel in Berkeley, are printed below.

which to make grants. Since that time the commission has functioned both as the principal intellectual force shaping historical editing in American history as well as the primary source of funds for its support.

In these years the commission has also moved beyond supporting projects that relate to the founding of the nation, the original area of its focus, to supporting historical editing in general. This broadening of the scope of projects supported occurred, I think, largely because of changes in the field of history. As a result of the radical reinterpretations of the sixties and seventies many American historians came to view our national development not primarily as the product of a few great white men, but rather as a complex mosaic reflecting the lives and energies of vast numbers of people—men and women of many races and ethnic groups. In response to this shift in the field of history, the commission expanded its attention. In the early seventies the commission actively solicited a broader range of projects. Special committees were appointed to recommend lists of editorial projects in black and women's studies. Many new types of editorial projects began to be supported, both as book and as microform editions.

Since 1965, while the scope of the commission's activities was broadening, its financial clout was also growing. Although many may have felt that funding from the commission was inadequate, in fact the funding available from the commission has been quite impressive. From 1954 to 1979, as Kohn and Curtis noted, over \$30,000,000 was either spent by the commission or generated by it from private sources, and the growth pattern is remarkable. From 1965 to 1971 there was available from the commission for the specific purposes of documentary editing \$350,000 a year; from 1971 to 1975, \$500,000; since that time it has been \$2,000,000 a year. Even though a significant portion of that sum has been absorbed by the Founding Fathers projects (some 15 to 20% a year), there has remained a very large federal subsidy to the field—since 1975 well over \$1,500,000 annually. In comparison to any other comparably sized field of scholarly endeavor in the humanities, it is enormous. We are, after all, talking about historical editing only for American history, not for history in general. Though I do not have specific information at hand, my guess is there is no funding program, outside of the sciences, in the federal government or in the private sector to match this kind of specialized funding for one scholarly field of comparable size. For example, there is no specialized program for support of American philosophy or litera-

To sum up then what has developed over the past 30 years of the commission's relationship to historical editing:

First, the commission has focused a great deal of money on documentary editing in American history;

Second, the commission has moved from being an ad-

vocate for the field to being both an advocate and a funder of projects in historical editing;

Third, the commission significantly broadened the scope of its activities from projects related to the founding of the nation to American historical editing in general. In other words, the commission moved from supporting a fairly narrow part of the field to supporting the entire field. In considering what projects should be done, the commission has asked, "What do historians want? What will they use?" As far as I can tell, they have not been asking, "What is appropriate for Federal support?" and this is, I argue, where the trouble lies.

I do not argue with the relatively large sum of money, as such, that has gone to documentary editing. I hope that in one form or another it will continue, for documentary editions are an important part of our scholarly resources.

Nor do I argue with the reinterpretations of history that led to the commission's broadening of its scope; for I believe the history of this country is more rightly viewed as just such a complex mosaic than as the result of the actions of a few powerful men.

I do not argue with the scholarly merits of most of the projects that have been supported in recent years. I am a strong supporter of the increase in documentary editing for historical areas that have been neglected. We need more reliable cultural carriers to document the experience, for example, of blacks and women as these groups have struggled to win a fuller interpretation of human rights. Indeed, in my view these fields can in general justify, better than traditional ones, comprehensive and highly annotated editions precisely because there is so little other material available. Full-scale scholarly editions could serve as keys to open up whole new areas for study, teaching, and scholarly enlightenment.

But as weighty and true as these points are, I do not believe they sustain an argument for a specialized federal program for documentary editing as it has come to function through the NHPRC.

Let me restate the key elements of the program. The commission has been the source of major federal funding for one area of scholarly humanistic endeavor, with that government agency holding both intellectual power to influence and shape the field of documentary editing as well as the power of the purse strings.

With this I have several problems.

First, I can find no grounds to justify the selection of this one area of scholarship in the humanities for such intense federal attention. Why historical editing as a field for general support rather than, say, American philosophy? To argue for support of this one narrow field, one should logically also argue for federal programs for other such highly specialized scholarly areas.

Second, such narrowly aimed government programs run the risk of generating projects primarily because there is money available rather than because there is a compel-

ling need in the field. Every project in such specific areas, in this case historical editing, is inclined to think it has a right to a share of the public money designated for those purposes. Though in my view most of the projects supported by the commission have been worthwhile, this is a classic danger of all narrowly focussed federal support programs; scholarly fields need to be particularly conscious of this risk.

Thirdly, and most important, leaving aside our special concern for historical editing as a scholarly field and considering instead the long term health of the mind of the nation, we must retain a cognizance of the risks of federal support for scholarship. While it is undoubtedly desirable to continue federal funding for humanistic scholarly and intellectual work, we must ensure that such support is provided free of too much government influence. This concern must be particularly sharp with regard to historical editing, for we are dealing with the academic field responsible for disseminating our nation's primary cultural carriers. The degree of intellectual influence that the commission, a government office, has exercised over the field of documentary editing has been too great.²

I am not suggesting that the commission has consciously exercised an unhealthy influence or intended to develop government control over a scholarly area. On the contrary, I admire the work of the commission and its staff. But the principle is wrong; the risk too great. The nature and degree of that risk become more apparent when we contemplate what the reaction of the scholarly community would be if the present administration in Washington were to suggest the creation of a Presidentially-appointed committee for support of, say, American philosophical and religious documentary editions, giving that committee the powers both to shape the field in general and to control federal funding of specific projects.

No one originally intended that the commission should have such broad powers and influence. It happened slowly and evolved innocently. But innocence of intent is insufficient justification for letting the situation remain. If federal government is to continue to fund historical editing, then the process must be made as free as possible from undue influence. If we are to continue federal support for historical editing, then it should be through a system that returns responsibility for the general shape of the field to the community of historians and scholarly editors. Any commission of the future should be responsible only for editorial projects that are particularly appropriate for such intense federal attention and interest.

The remaining question, then, is whether there is any part of documentary editing that justifies this kind of federal attention?

Richard Kohn and George Curtis criticize the commission for the judgments it has made about what should be

edited. They believe the commission has funded too many projects that, in their opinion, are not useful to historians. The agency could best rectify its mistakes, according to these critics, by funding editions on the basis of their true utility, which they go on to define as "records of wide- and permanent-enough interest to justify national dissemination."³

I do not agree with these writers that the key to determining projects that are appropriate for specialized federal support is their degree of usefulness to historians generally.

Any effort to determine the extent and nature of the use of such works is largely fruitless.⁴ If approached on a quantitative basis, it is extremely difficult to attain the necessary information either from individuals or from libraries, and, in any case, quantitative answers tell us little. Even when we know how many copies of a given edition are sold, we still cannot determine how many people then use those volumes. More importantly, in scholarship the focus must be on quality rather than on quantity. Even one significant use of a volume by a scholar or a teacher could have an important impact on our understanding of history. And who is to say when such a "significant use" will occur? It could be the year the volume is published, or it might be 30 years later.

Grounds for a special federal program for documentary editing must be more clearly defined than the use question permits. Such grounds must provide sound justification for such intense federal attention to a scholarly field.

I believe such grounds can be defined by taking as the basic rationale for such a program the creation of documentary editions that improve the function of or that serve the specific purposes of a branch of the federal government. Under this guideline we can place, first and foremost, any historical editions that contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the Constitution, its history, and interpretation. Any editions that could contribute to the more effective work of the Supreme Court would have the strongest claim for support in such a program. Some of the editions funded by the commission are, in fact, already being extensively used by legal historians and lawyers, as a survey of the *Social Sciences Citation Index* reveals.⁵ The appearance of some of these documentary editions is clearly generating extensive scholarly work in legal history and theory that may have a useful relationship to the work of the Supreme Court.

Any documentary editions that can help elucidate the work and thoughts of those who were intimately and broadly involved in the founding of the nation as it relates to the Constitution command special attention from the federal government. In addition to projects relating to the writing of the Constitution, there may be other subjects (e.g. the vote for women) relating to constitutional issues critical in the development of the nation's history that

would be appropriate for support. Such projects contain the hard evidence needed by the courts, lawyers, judges, and legal historians, that will permit us to continue working out the principles on which rest the civil liberties of us all. These are unassailable grounds for claiming congressional funds specifically in support of historical documentary editing.

Still following the principle of looking at an edition's relationship to a function of the government, other areas that might command such support could include the National Archives, which may require certain documentary editions to make possible full and effective use of its own resources. A case might also be made for the State Department's need for papers relating to the history of the territories to ensure the availability of accurate historical material for possible use in diplomatic relations or treaty negotiations concerning geographical boundaries. The commission should serve as the coordinating office, and perhaps the funding agency, for all such projects.

The basic guideline I am proposing as a means of shaping the commission's work for the future with regard to historical editing is, in fact, related to the question of use. But the question is focussed on whether the materials to be funded are of use to a federal office, not to historians generally.

Adoption of this guideline of use to federal purposes implies something about the nature of the editions that should be supported by such a program. In order to ensure the most complete and accurate use, any editions funded by such a program deserve the fullest editorial attention. Editions should be complete, well-annotated, and fully indexed.

As for the rest of historical editing, which is the larger part of the field, these projects can be directed to and appropriately considered by the Editing Program at the NEH, an existing federal program that deals with the full range of editorial projects in the humanities. Many of these editions are already receiving some support from that office on the basis of their scholarly and humanistic merit.

But, realistically, we must acknowledge that the field

of historical editing is about to be pruned. Even if the commission's responsibilities for historical editing were revised along the lines suggested, which would have the effect of continuing support for some of the larger and more expensive editions, and even if the NEH took on a substantial portion of those remaining, there would still be editions that could not survive. Even if the commission is not reshaped and even if congressional funding is continued, that support will not be on the level of the past.

To prevent this pruning from being unnecessarily destructive Congress should not force the sudden cutting off of any edition that has been created by the commission. A phasing out period is needed during which such projects can be concluded, scaled down, or funded elsewhere. Time must be permitted for staff people to adjust their professional lives. To kill projects thoughtlessly would be as irresponsible as to have funded them originally with an insufficient rationale.

Historical editing must begin to think about itself in new and different ways. This crisis could yet prove to be a timely development, forcing the field to address some issues and trends that, if they had been allowed to continue, could have been as damaging to scholarship as this pruning will be.

1. Richard H. Kohn and George M. Curtis III, "The Government, the Historical Profession, and Historical Editing: A Review," *Reviews in American History* (June 1981): 145-155, includes extensive statistics on support from the NHPRC and the National Endowment for the Humanities for historical editing.
2. On this point I am in agreement with Kohn and Curtis, although there are other aspects of their argument with which I disagree.
3. Kohn and Curtis, p. 149.
4. For further comment on the problems involved in trying to determine the use of documentary editions, see Henry F. Graff and A. Simone Reagor, *Documentary Editing in Crisis: Some Reflections and Recommendations* (March 1981; a report prepared for and available from the NHPRC), pp. 8 and 9.
5. Graff and Reagor, pp. 9 and 10.

