

Archivist/Sofia/Sept24REV2

Open Government and the National Archives: The View from Washington

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Sofia, Bulgaria, September 24, 2010

Thank you.

It is a pleasure to be here to talk to you today about not only the role of the National Archives and Records Administration of the United States, but also what we call "open government."

My agency's role in our democracy is clear and simple: We are the nation's record keeper. We safeguard and preserve the records of our national government so our citizens can use them and learn from them far into the future.

These records range from our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution to military personnel files and agency memos to today's e-mails and digital images.

And we provide access to these records—ready, easy access to all who come to us.

The records that end up in our permanent holdings represent only 2 to 3 percent of all those created by Federal departments and agencies. But they are the most important ones. Over the years, millions of people have come to our facilities around the country to work with these records.

They seek genealogy information in the form of ships' records, immigration lists, or Civil War pension files.

Millions more contact us for their military records to qualify for government benefits.

Lawyers use our records to prepare court cases or research past cases.

Students and scholars examine documents for term papers and dissertations.

Historians and journalists mine the records for details for books and articles.

Others consult the records of our Congress to enrich their understanding of representative government, and still others visit our Presidential libraries around the country to do research on one of the 13 most recent Presidential administrations.

All told, we have 10 billion pages of paper documents, more than 14 million still photographs, miles and miles of video and audio tape and film, and thousands of artifacts, maps and charts.

Now, records are coming to us from other federal agencies and departments, not on paper, but in electronic form—records that were born digital. They come to us in the form of text documents, e-mails, digital images, web pages, spread sheets, satellite imagery, and eventually blogs, tweets, and all the other kinds of “records” that we are creating in this digital age.

They are headed for our Electronic Records Archives, or ERA, which will eventually hold all the important records of our government.

As we move into the digital age, we don’t want to leave our past behind. So in addition to these born-digital electronic records, our ERA will hold traditional records that have been digitized.

Of course, we have our own digitization programs. But digitizing is expensive and time-consuming work. So we also have active partnerships with private

sector entities to digitize some of the most-requested traditional records to post online as soon as possible.

The aim of ERA is to make these records accessible far into the future—free from dependence on any specific hardware or software used to create them. These records then can be used by anyone, at any time, from anywhere in the world.

The first phase of ERA ran from 2005 to 2008 and involved electronic records from four federal agencies. This year, the number of federal agencies that use the ERA is being expanded from these four to about 30. The records of President George W. Bush’s administration are also now in the ERA.

Eventually, it will be mandatory for all federal departments and agencies to move their permanent records to ERA, which is on schedule to be fully operational in 2012.

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As I noted before, the National Archives is in the access business, which has made us a pretty open agency.

So when President Barack Obama announced his “Open Government Initiative” the day after he took office in January 2009, we were more than ready.

The President called for the creation of a culture of transparency, participation, and collaboration in and among Federal agencies. The goal: Transform the way the government does business and the way people interact with the government.

Complying with this directive required no change in the mission of the Archives.

The thinking behind his Open Government Directive is the essence of the work we do every day. It's rooted in the belief that citizens have the right to see, examine, and learn from the records of their government. This principle is already embedded in the mission statement of our agency.

It reads:

The National Archives and Records Administration serves American democracy by safeguarding and preserving the records of our Government, ensuring that the people can discover, use, and learn from this documentary heritage. We ensure continuing access to the essential documentation of the rights of American citizens and the actions of their government. We support democracy, promote civic education, and facilitate historical understanding of our national experience.

In his Open Government Initiative, the President directed all agencies to develop their own open government plan. We have done so. Our plan:

- Strengthens the culture of open government at the National Archives**
- Strengthens transparency at the National Archives.**
- Provides leadership and services to enable the Federal Government to meet 21st Century challenges.**
- Develops web and data services to meet our 21st Century needs.**

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Let me tell you of some of the things we're doing to bring about a culture of "open government" at the National Archives.

We are reviewing, on an expedited basis, a backlog of about 400 million pages of records that have been classified for years. The goal is to declassify as many of them as possible.

These records include some pertaining to military operations and World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War --- all of which are of great interest to historians of these periods in our nation's history. The deadline to finish these reviews is December 31, 2013.

To oversee this work, we established a National Declassification Center within NARA. It has adopted as its motto, "releasing all we can, protecting what we must."

The National Declassification Center has also taken the lead on streamlining the declassification process government-wide. It will do this by overseeing the development of common declassification processes among all departments and agencies. There are currently some 2,000 different sets of declassification guidelines throughout the government, which has made the records processing more difficult.

Another office we established is the Office of Government Information Services, which monitors activity under the Freedom of Information Act throughout the government.

The Freedom of Information Act grants the legal right for any person to obtain access to information in the departments and agencies of the executive branch of our government. This right is limited when the information falls under one of the act's nine statutory exemptions, such as classified records pertaining to national security.

This office helps mediate disputes between Freedom of Information Act requesters and Federal agencies and provides guidance for agencies in

dealing with freedom of information aspects of the Open Government Directive.

Although very few denials of records under this act are appealed, such actions involve significant administrative and legal costs. We work with the Department of Justice—as well as with other agencies, requesters, and freedom-of-information advocates—to find ways to make the act work more effectively and efficiently.

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Our most visible activities in open government have been with social media, and we are using these new media tools to improve internal as well as external communication.

My intent is to make the National Archives the leader in government in the use of social media to bring the people closer to the records of their government, so they can better use them when they need to do so.

To make this happen, we plan to leverage the power of the Internet. Accordingly, our web site, search capabilities, digitization strategies, and our use of social media to attract the public must be strong, robust, interesting and engaging.

Already, we have seven “blogs”— including my own. We have a strong social media presence that includes 24 Facebook sites, seven Twitter accounts, six YouTube locations and our own Wiki—just to name a few. They are all active, and they provide new portals for the public to use the resources in the National Archives.

We are also redesigning our main web site, archives.gov. We want to streamline its search capabilities and make it more customer-friendly to maximize public participation. So, later this year, you’ll see a new, less-

cluttered, easier-to-navigate web site for the National Archives. Please visit us.

We intend for our entire website, which provides access to our holdings online, to be a user-focused community experience. And we intend to explore ways to develop our current catalog into a social catalog that allows our online users -- as well as those who come to us in person --- to contribute information to descriptions of our records.

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My experience in libraries over the years convinces me that we learn so much more about our holdings when someone who makes use of the materials helps us better understand and describe what we have.

Often, researchers and authors become quite interested in a particular person, event, or period in American history, deeply immersed in their subjects, and passionate about the records pertaining to their area of interest.

They become more familiar with a particular set of records than our own archivists, each of whom has responsibility for thousands of records. Understand, please, that professional archivists cannot do everything and know everything.

These researchers—these ordinary citizens—can be of great help in writing descriptions of these records in partnership with the professional archivists on our staff. They can make major contributions to preserving, describing and understanding the records in our holdings.

We are calling them “Citizen Archivists.”

Not long ago, I met Jonathan Webb Deiss, a researcher at the Archives. His knowledge and enthusiasm for discovering treasures makes him a model Citizen Archivist.

Jonathan told me how he found a previously unpublicized Revolutionary War diary in the records of the United States Senate.

As a knowledgeable and skilled researcher, Jonathan knew that Samuel Leavitt's diary of his journey to West Point was important. Leavitt was a soldier from Stratham, New Hampshire. He enlisted in early July 1780 to serve a three month tour. The journal starts on July 5, 1780, and covers his march to West Point, his tour of duty, and his march back to New Hampshire in October 1780.

On page 17 of the diary, Leavitt describes General George Washington at West Point and hearing the "news of Gen'l Arnold the commander of the Garrison deserting to the Enemy." Today, in our American culture, the name of Benedict Arnold is synonymous with that of a traitor.

Jonathan's discovery wasn't the first surprise lurking in the stacks. Another example:

In 1996, a private researcher at the Archives discovered in declassified U.S. Army records from World War II a list of primarily Jewish unclaimed accounts in a Swiss bank totaling more than \$20 million. This list provided proof that information about wartime assets in the highly secretive Swiss Banks could be found in records in the National Archives.

This discovery led to lawsuits and congressional hearings to force Swiss banks to disclose the assets they received—and to a re-evaluation of Switzerland's neutrality in the War. It also set off a very big wave of archival

research. That researcher has been a member of our staff now for nearly 10 years.

These are just two examples of researchers contributing in very interesting ways. "Citizen Archivists" can help us fulfill our mission and enrich the content and value of our records for those who consult them in the future. In rethinking our traditional approaches, we need to do more to leverage the knowledge and expertise of Citizen Archivists.

And these examples prove that there are still treasures to find within our records.

(I should note here that despite what you saw in the American movie, National Treasure, several years ago, there is NO treasure map on the back of our Declaration of Independence.)

With almost 10 billion pieces of paper, we don't know what researchers, historians, and Citizen Archivists will find in the future. And we don't know what kind of impact their discoveries will have on scholarship and our understanding of historical events.

In fact, we've had "citizen archivists" pouring over our records for years. Now, we want to engage them and encourage them to participate and collaborate much more fully in adding value to the records they work with. They can provide the historical context so we can better understand why a certain document is important. And we can share this with our customers so they, too, can benefit from a fuller understanding of a document's significance.

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We have also moved on another front to strengthen the connection between our citizens and the daily workings of their national government.

The Federal Register is often called the government's daily newspaper.

It publishes every federal work day and contains current Presidential proclamations and executive orders, new rules and regulations from federal agencies and departments, proposed rules and regulations, and documents that are required by law to be published.

Now, the Federal Register is pushing the frontiers of democracy and open government ever outward.

We have re-launched it as a daily online newspaper for the 21st Century. We call it Federal Register 2.0.

It's a new, user-friendly version of the print edition and functions much like a newspaper web page. It makes it easier for all our citizens to find what they need, comment on proposed rules, and share materials relevant to their interests.

Like a newspaper, it has individual sections for Money, Environment, World, Science and Technology, Business and Industry, and Health and Public Welfare.

It also has a constantly-updated Calendar of Events that lists public meetings about proposed government actions. And it tracks the openings and closings of comment periods on proposed rules and regulations and the effective dates of new rules. A timeline pinpoints the status of a regulatory action. Each document that asks for public comments features a highly visible button for the public to submit comments directly to the official agency site.

For those unfamiliar with how the federal government formulates and implements new rules and regulations, the site also offers tutorials, articles from academic contributors, and access to government document librarians.

The new Federal Register goes beyond information about government rules. It is an exercise in citizen engagement. It helps people easily participate in government and collaborate with federal officials by offering their views on proposed rules --- all in a transparent, open setting so vital to a democracy.

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Now we come to the structure of the National Archives itself.

To more effectively meet the challenges the 21st Century facing the National Archives, the agency is about to undergo a restructuring, a reorganization.

I felt that we needed to make sure our organizational structure reflected our goal of making six key transformations over the next five years. Those transformations involve:

- * Working as one NARA, not just as component parts.**
- * Embracing the primacy of electronic information in all facets of our work and position NARA to lead accordingly.**
- * Fostering a culture of leadership, not just as a position, but the way we all conduct our work.**
- * Transforming NARA into a great place to work that trusts and empowers all of our people, the agency's most vital resource.**
- * Creating structures and processes to allow our staff to more effectively meet the needs of our customers.**
- * Opening our organizational boundaries to learn from others.**

I appointed a small task force on transformation to work on it all summer, and the group gave me a draft on August 30. We posted it on our internal

web page and asked the staff to read it and respond with their reaction and comments.

That they did---and we got lots of very thoughtful comments.

I received the final report September 15. I'll be sharing it with the staff later this month, with an aggressive implementation plan and timetable to follow before the end of the year.

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The United States National Archives and Records Administration is restructuring itself into a more effective and efficient agency to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. But a new organizational structure by itself won't bring about change.

At the Archives, we will need to think smarter and work smarter. We will need to take some risks in doing things differently than we have been doing them. And we need to be able to harness the new technologies that will enable us to do those things successfully.

We intend to be the leader and the innovator in opening up our government so we are better able to examine, debate, and resolve the problems we face in the coming decades. To help us do these things, we need a culture of Open Government based on participation, collaboration, and transparency.

Regardless of how we look after a transformation, however, we will still view as unchanged our unique role in our democracy: To preserve and make accessible the records that document the rights of our citizens, the actions of our government officials, and the full story of the American experience.

Thank you.