



Activism



I've been asked to talk about "activism". What is it? Here are some definitions:

- taking action to effect social change
- vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals, sometimes by demonstrations
- action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine
- direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue

In short, it's about rocking the boat; making trouble; causing a fuss; participating.

High Activism

You are Edward Snowden. You're Bradley Manning, Mordechai Vanunu, Daniel Ellsberg. The documents you handle hide secrets. Dark secrets. They tell of covert and illegal government activity that results in the loss of innocent lives. They disclose rogue, unregulated nuclear programmes that threaten millions. You think people should know. But that would be a betrayal of your employer. You might be prosecuted under section 35P. Some will call it treason.

What do you do?

You are Benjamin Koh; you are Jeffrey Wigand. You work for Big Tobacco. They've just settled a case out of court. You are told to redraft the document retention schedule so that materials uncovered in discovery during the case just settled don't have to be kept any more. You are told this is legal because there are no cases currently before the courts. This may even be correct. But everyone knows that similar cases will be brought in future and doing what you've been asked will deny those litigants their day in court.

What do you do?

Some colleagues, perhaps some of those sitting in this room tonight, will say: do nothing. It's none of your business. Yours is not the controlling mind (that is true). Your job is to provide effective recordkeeping advice and services. Opinions on the political and social implications must remain private and personal. You must be impartial, remain neutral. They may even say that good recordkeeping is inherently a social good – and that our accountability is simply to do it well. Look at the [handout](#) (attached) to see what our South African colleague, Verne Harris, thinks about that. He says that we can't be impartial, that we can't be neutral, and that the call for justice from outside the archive is more important than service to archiving. He says that choosing to be inactive is a kind of activism whether we like it or not. Your only choice is the form activism will take. What do you think?

If not on the basis of personal opinion, what should guide your choice then? An engineer must act if a structure is unsafe and a risk to life, even if their employer forbids it. We have seen doctors and nurses speak out on conditions in the refugee detention camps, even at the risk of their jobs, even when the government makes it illegal. These people don't act out of private conviction, they are bound to act by the canons of their professions – regardless of what they may think privately. Like us, they owe a duty to those who employ them, but they also acknowledge a duty to the society in which they live. Their employer does not own them body and soul.

Unfortunately, we don't have that. You will get precious little guidance from our codes of ethics on how to deal with difficult choices when confronted by conflicting obligations. Your own personal conscience is all you will have to guide you. I've been there and I can tell you it is so. The good news is that most of you will never be faced with making an heroic choice. It's most unlikely that you will have to decide to act in a way that might see you knocking on the door of some foreign embassy late at night seeking political asylum.

Common (or Garden) Activism

More often you will be asked to support or participate in what the ASA calls "public issues" campaigns. These may be in support of

- vested interest issues where matters involving us are on the table : a threatened programme; branch closures; forced amalgamation with a library; support for a colleague in trouble; or
- true public interest issues with a recordkeeping dimension : access; privacy; poor recordkeeping practice; improper destruction.

In a lot of cases we only hold what is euphemistically called a "watching brief". Action is intermittent and ad hoc. There is no telling what issues we will choose to take up. Our profession is small and such campaigns must be driven by a few who can spare the time. For this reason, perhaps, the line we take is unpredictable and reflects the opinions of those who are able to be involved rather than an enduring rationale for the positions we collectively take up over time. And there's not much evidence that we influence the final outcome in many cases.

But what really matters is that we aren't always very good at campaigning.

- Many years ago, I was in charge of the PROV in Melbourne. We were catastrophically under-funded. The Chairman of my Advisory Council, AGL Shaw, arranged a lunch with three or four leading historians at the Melbourne University Staff Club – not proper public service behaviour, perhaps, but very Melbourne. We'd done all we could within government and now it was up to them. Don't you worry, they said, we're onto it (or words to that effect). Sure enough, a few weeks later a letter came in to the Minister bearing many very impressive signatures. It was sent to me for reply and I drafted a letter back fobbing them off. The Minister liked it and sent it. Then, nothing. Six months later, AGL organised another lunch. We said to them: where are you? They looked genuinely pained and surprised. "But Chris," they said, "we sent a letter. What more could we do?"

- At around that time, the genealogists wanted the Victorian Government to follow the other States and release the BDM indexes on microfilm. The government said no. Letters came in, meetings were held, the Government's reasons were explained. The genes were ignored. The official who dealt with all this had an office down the hall from me. He was outraged that a bunch of hobbyists were presuming to lecture the Government on matters affecting the revenue. He dug in his heels but wave after wave of letters came in. They simply wouldn't take no for an answer. After a year, he wilted. "You know these people, Chris," he wailed, "when is it going to stop?" "It's going to stop, Merv," I told him, "when they get what they want." And it did.
- Some time later, I went to New Zealand – different country, different mores. They had a campaign going on against the Archives' parent department and they had some success. They obtained a court judgement against the department for misusing funds allocated for the Archives. After a change of Government, the Archives was set up as a Department in its own right. A result! It hasn't lasted, but it was a result. Shortly after I arrived, I went up country for an evening branch meeting of the Genealogical Society. Before I spoke, the chair read out a letter from the national president saying that they were joining the campaign and everyone should write to their local member, the Minister, and the Department and what should be in the letters. The chair looked up and said, "Well, I didn't understand all of that, but it sounds important, so we should do what Heather says." Now, the Genealogical Society was (and maybe still is) the biggest non-government organisation in the country. Every MP has a close friend or relative who belongs. The MPs didn't understand the issue either but, in a short time, they were asking each other "What the hell have we done to upset Aunt Gladys and Uncle Fred?"

These anecdotes illustrate the most important elements in any successful campaign: focus and persistence. Our public campaigning, alas, doesn't always rise to that standard.

Personal Activism

If all this sounds a bit discouraging, remember that the power to act lies ultimately in your hands. The power of one! Decisions, they say, are made by those who turn up. If this is your profession, and not just a job, you will want to participate:

- Commit to life-long continuing professional development. Go on learning, writing, speaking.
- Attend meetings like this. Go to the conferences.
- Don't confine your reading to technical matters. Read also about governance and public issues.
- Join the listservs and make contributions - not just to ours. Go and lurk on the overseas lists as well.
- Make contributions to the professional dialogue here and internationally by voicing your opinions, thus making sure that there is one.
- Respond to the opinions of others. Keep the conversation going.

- Don't be afraid to speak up. Most of the lists and groups like to hear from you and will respond positively. Not the ICA, perhaps, but most of the others.

Tony Leviston has written a paper on re-inventing the ASA. Kylie Perceval is socialising it at branch meetings around the country. I wouldn't be surprised if motions are made to amend the Rules. But the paper (and I've said this publicly) provides answers rather than questions. In 1974, when we set up the ASA, there was whole series of meetings over many months in each of the capital cities. Different views were developed, circulated and thrashed out. Eventually, Mike Saclier spent about a week putting together a draft options paper. We still only had questions at that stage. Next we had national ballots on the options. That was then circulated and revised. Only then was a small group told to develop proposals to be put to a vote. What is missing (so far) from the 2016 exercise is an adequate provision for member activism (in my opinion). Is anyone denied a chance to have their say? Of course not. But that's not the same as a participatory process.

Activists don't always see their views prevail but more often than not the outcome, whatever it is, is likely to be different than it would have been if they'd just shut up.

Decisions are made by those who turn up.

Well, maybe not in the ICA.



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Handout

... Through most of my career I had no difficulty discerning the call of justice. The lines were drawn clearly. The enemy was plain to see. I was for remembering and against forgetting; for exposure and against the secret; for seeing, against blindness; for freedom and justice, against power and oppression. And I believed, or came to believe early on, that these values possessed a universal validity rooted, in the first instance, not in the notion that struggles for justice should take precedence over professional imperatives, but in the belief that professional imperatives are defined by the idea of struggle for justice. I believed, in other words, that 'the archive' itself binds archivists to be for remembering and against forgetting, for exposure and against the secret, and so on. I believed in 'the archive', as idea, as body of theory, transcending particular societal and other contexts, and yet always already calling archivists into struggles for justice...

... I now question whether the theory we call 'archival' has anything to say to or about justice ... 'The archive' ... never speaks to us as a thing in and of itself. It speaks to us through the specificities of particular relations of power and societal dynamics ... The questions, of course, remain: should archivists strain against the gradient of archontic power? Should they strain against a 'power to control'? Should they strain to deploy constructive rather than oppressive power? To all these questions I say "yes!" Not, as I did in the past, because power is always oppressive and because 'the archive' calls us to fight for justice. I say "yes!" because I believe that the call of and for justice - which comes from outside of [the] archive, outside of any 'archival' theory - is a calling more important than any 'archival' calling.

Those who believe they can keep these callings separate, who believe they can separate the 'professional' from other spaces, who believe they can remain professionally impartial, fool themselves and condemn themselves to being the pawns of those who hold power. As Chris Hurley has pointed out graphically: "We cannot comfortably design a better system for documenting the number of heads being processed through the gas chambers as if good recordkeeping (in a technical sense) can be divorced from the uses to which it is put." The role of pawn, even in a democracy I would argue, is closed to the call of justice and, in the end, is profoundly reactionary...

Verne Harris *Seeing (in) Blindness: South Africa, Archives, and Passion for Justice*
http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/LibArchMus/Arch/Harris_V_Freedom_of_information_in_SA_Archives_for_justice.pdf