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Reflections on being a “contemporary archivist”

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Although formally a historian of science, I work on very contemporary issues involving the public understanding of science. My interest in science journalism takes me each year to the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, where science journalists in the United States gather. When journalists realize that I am not there to write stories emerging from that year's meeting, they invariably ask: “Why are you here?” To which I reply: “I'm watching you—you're my lab rats.”

In writing these notes on my experiences creating archives of contemporary science (including those for cold fusion and Y2K), I feel a bit like the science journalists I normally study. Over the years, I have not been especially reflective about my activities as an archivist of “science as it happens” or “science and technology in the making.” I can tell you what I do, but I cannot tell you much about the theory or deeper meaning of how I approach archiving. For you, the reader, I am a lab rat—although, as you will see, a particularly opinionated rat who cares how the maze of contemporary history is organized.

What follows is based on my experiences in the last fifteen years of contributing to various archives on issues or events in science and technology as they happened. After describing the experiences, I will address two types of issues: practical and conceptual. But before I proceed, another comparison to journalism: There is a famous saying, that journalism is the first draft of history. The same is true for the contemporary archivist: he or she is creating the first draft of what historians will have access to later. I know that the questions below of comprehensiveness, of the value of particular records, about the challenge of identifying materials that might not be in the most obvious place, etc., have been dealt with many times before by other historians and archivists. But one of the effects of my focus on documenting contemporary issues has been that I have much less time to review the literature about historiography, archiving, and so on. (Perhaps I should not admit this in a chapter to appear in a book co-edited by Thomas Söderqvist, but I have not even read carefully some of the earlier works that he and others have produced that address issues relevant to contemporary archiving.¹) I am too busy trying to create the archives themselves. So I apologize in advance for what will seem like beginner's mistakes.