

From the Chair



Let's Tell a Story!

Shari Laster

A picture is worth a thousand words.” Thanks to *DttP* editor Elizabeth Psyck’s recent, extensive research into cat pictures, I am taking the opportunity to write about a pair of photographs.

As a visual art, photography is a medium of transition. When we view a photograph, we see a slice of the world, frozen in time. For a moment we disappear into the image, seeing it as if we were there, with the tableau before us in its original and unmediated state. This sense of transition is a deception, or if you like, a trick of the medium. Whether the photograph was snapped at the spur of a moment, or the product of careful arrangement, or selected for its visual elements, the image is the product of an invisible other—a photographer who hovers between us and the tableau, appearing as we examine the image, and disappearing again as we are involuntarily thrust into the world it depicts.

Perhaps this is part of the reason that photography can be a keenly-honed instrument for telling stories. Our eyes tell us that the photograph documented something that has happened, and this visceral sense of presence further illuminates the elements presented in the image. When we see a photograph with a contented cat that appears to be doing its part for the campaign trail, as with this issue’s cover image, we think of other cats we’ve seen, purring contentedly and snuggling up with a couple humans. Or perhaps we connect it with other political campaigns, slogans, and signs. As we spend more time with the photograph, our thoughts could also wander outward: we consider the political circumstances of this campaign, or imagine the happy life of this kitty who likely attended many similar rallies. Then we remember again that some unnamed person must have knelt down somewhere nearby to capture the moment.

I want to suggest that government information plays a similar role in uncovering history. There is a deceptive (or

tricky) sense of absolutism when we engage with a publication as a direct and unmediated account of government activity. We accept the intellectual content of the publication as fundamentally documentarian, and we presuppose that it presents a clear and accurate narrative: events that took place, decisions that were made, or information that was deemed pertinent to the public interest.

Yet at some level, we must also be aware that government information as a medium is not neutral. Its essence is political. That is not to say that all government information is inherently partisan, although it can be. But the content has invisible political context, including the political priorities of the administration in office and the behind-the-scenes power-brokering that is an inescapable part of the appropriations process. There are also broader social factors of power, enfranchisement, and political voice as background to governance itself. This context acts as

a force on the informational content of the document: shaping it or compressing it, perhaps deforming it, depending on circumstances.

I am not arguing here that the intellectual content of government information is fundamentally suspect and untrustworthy. Rather, the opposite: the political nature of its creation casts a shadow that deepens what we can discern from the document. With a photograph, we can consider and evaluate the aesthetic and narrative qualities that resulted from deliberate decisions and lucky happenstances on the part of the photographer. With a government document, we can identify latent characteristics that make visible the political context for the creation of that publication, website, video, or social media posting.

Librarians collecting government documents are doing more than just making an assortment of discrete objects available for future access and study. They are contributing to a corpus that, when assembled at a macro level, tells stories about the content that comprises it. This includes publications and records, but also archives, images, objects, and other forms of



Dorothea Lange, “San Francisco, California. A home is sought for kittens as owners prepare to evacuate. Evacuees of Japanese ancestry will be housed in War Relocation Authority centers for the duration,” Records of the War Relocation Authority, 1941–1989, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/536470>.

documentary evidence. It is imperative that we engage with those creating—and using—collections that depict human experience outside of the official narrative, particularly those representing voices systematically excluded from political and social power.

When I teach students about government information, I use the documentary trail of the War Relocation Authority as an example of the ways in which publications illuminate history. The human devastation brought by the forced relocation and internment of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry during World War II is, for the most part, unacknowledged and unvoiced in government documents of the period. Starting with an Executive Order, moving through plans, reports, brochures, and propaganda, and concluding with the agency's own summary of its activities, these materials provide a narrow view into the enormity of the wrong that the US government perpetrated by incarcerating people indiscriminately and without due process.

When we read accounts from individuals who were forced to endure the indignity of concentration camps and the injustices of forced relocation, asset forfeiture, and incarceration, we

are immersed in narrative context. These voices are excluded from the official documentary history precisely because they testify to the racist, xenophobic politics that gave rise to the agency's existence and mission. In this sense, WRA publications depict some of the most important parts of the agency's story though their silences.

As stewards of government information, it is our work to ensure that collections of today are assembled, described, preserved, and made accessible in ways that support and encourage users in taking the transitory leap from document to context. Working in partnership with researchers, archivists, records managers, and curators, we have the opportunity to make sure that we are doing our part in enabling others to tell the stories that must be told.

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