

National Historical Publications and Records Commission
Executive Summary Minutes
of March 7, 2014

The meeting was called to order by David S. Ferriero, chairman, at 1:00 pm in the Archivist's Board Room of the National Archives in Washington, DC.

Commission Members present:

David S. Ferriero, Chairperson
Erin Mahan
Stephen P. Randolph
Raymond Smock
Rodger Stroup

Via Teleconference

Peter Gottlieb
F. Gerald Handfield
Karen L. Jefferson
George Miles
Nicole Saylor
Will Thomas

NHPRC staff present:

Kathleen Williams, Executive Director
Lucy Barber
Jeff de la Concepcion
Keith Donohue
Christine Dunham
Alexander Lorch
Nancy Melley
Daniel A. Stokes

Guest

Joe Wicentowski

I: Welcome, Announcements, Agenda

Mr. Ferriero opened the meeting and greeted the Members, staff, and guests.

II. Discussion of the Guidelines

Overview of the process

Ms. Williams provided an overview of the process that led to the development of the draft guidelines under consideration. The new programs were drawn from the mission of the NHPRC and the National Archives and from initiatives for open government and digital government from the White House.

The new program guidelines have five goals that situate the Commission squarely with the future. Each is driven by the goal of greater public access to historical records through: Publishing; Access through processing; digital government including the states; public programming at the state level; and new

approaches for citizen engagement and digital literacy. Mr. Ferriero echoed her remarks and pointed out that the programs and new directions are tied to the Report to the President.

Free Online Access

Ms. Williams then discussed the announcement review process, stating that the drafts had been made available for public comment in February and would remain so until March 31, 2014. She referred to a prepared statement for some general observations about the comments, emphasizing the question of “free online access” and how such a requirement might affect current projects and publishers.

Free online access means, in this context, that the project must provide ways by which individuals can examine, freely over the Web, the primary source documents within a collection. These documents can be in an image edition, or a transcribed edition, or an annotated edition. They can be PDFs of volumes, images of original documents, or a searchable database. They can be hosted on a project website, on their parent institution’s library site, in a digital humanities system, or some other web accessible locations. But they must be accessible online to any user at no charge.

Staff have prepared two separate guidelines for publishing historical records. The “Transition Support” grant program has two main goals:

- to allow print-only projects near the end of their completion date to finish their print edition by 2018, with no requirement from the NHPRC concerning an online edition; and
- to help projects that are not currently online and that will continue beyond 2018 to create a digital version of the historical documents collection and create a plan to publish it online.

Mr. Handfield asked if the money for microfilm editions had come out of the same pot of money for other publishing projects, and staff explained that those were funded out of the same program. Ms. Mahan asked why 2018, and Ms. Williams replied that staff was looking to give projects time to either complete their print editions or find ways to publish online.

Costs associated with Free Online Access

A general conversation followed regarding costs associated with publishing and maintaining online editions. Mr. Miles asked if the Commission had researched the costs associated with going online. Ms. Barber replied that while staff had not done extensive research, it had looked at the costs associated with retrospective conversion, finding a rate of approximately \$10k for a 30 volume edition into PDF, and those figures correlate with costs at the Founders Online and Marshall papers. Mr. Miles then asked about the ongoing costs of maintaining a collection online, and Ms. Barber explained that some of the projects had relationships with libraries to preserve collections and host projects, citing Mississippi State and the Grant papers, and Virginia Tech with the Marshall papers.

Directing the Commission to the spreadsheet on ongoing projects, Ms. Williams pointed out that very few projects currently receiving funding do not have online access. Mr. Smock noted that many of the projects are on Rotunda and wondered how they are free. Ms. Barber said that some of the projects in Rotunda are also on Founders Online and are thus freely available. Ms. Mahan questioned why we should be pushing for both “free” and “digital” as criteria.

Impact on Publishers

The conversation then turned to the impact of offering free editions on the publishers. Mr. Miles wondered if the projects would lose revenue if they went to free online access. Ms. Williams pointed out that the projects

themselves do not receive a return from print editions, but the university presses do. In some instances, the publishers print an edition and delay online publication for 12-18 months in order to sell print volumes to libraries and others. Mr. Miles pointed out that the scientific community is under the same strain, but they are compelled, when federally-funded, to put it online. Mr. Ferriero supported a call for greater detail on the impact on publishing, but he observed that university presses are not breaking even on publishing historical documentary editions and that they see publishing such works as part of their educational mission.

A Common Repository

The Commission moved on to a discussion of a central repository for historical documentary editions. Mr. Thomas said that the issue of “free” has been misconstrued. The projects are already heavily subsidized both by their host institutions and by their funders. Finding a way to make them freely available would be to create a common repository. Ms. Williams said that one editor posited the same notion, saying a digital repository could speak to both access and preservation. Mr. Miles agreed a solution to the long-term costs of access and maintenance would be a way for the Commission and National Archives to lead the field. Mr. Thomas said that if long-term maintenance was left to the projects, the question would be how long would they be able to afford it. The great power of the Founders Online is that the National Archives developed a central repository.

Mr. Randolph said that is very important to inject quality controls in a common repository. The State Department has undertaken the transition from print to digital, and they would offer an information and guidance package to the community about how to proceed. Mr. Handfield seconded a notion on a common repository, and Ms. Mahan asked about the possibility that the National Archives itself as a common repository. Mr. Miles suggested that there are other possible scenarios—such as a networked consortia of repositories—and that the important thing is that the Commission and National Archives need to be behind solving the access question. Mr. Ferriero posited the Digital Public Library of America as one potential host.

Mr. Thomas supported the general direction the Commission was heading and pointed out that several long-term implications need to be thought through, particularly the question of open access to historical records collections. The first issue is the metadata and how such a system could develop a graduated set of entries into a common repository. Some projects, he felt, want to keep the editorial apparatus behind a paywall, but the objects themselves and their metadata could be accessible if projects committed to open access. Ms. Jefferson agreed that a common repository would be a good solution, providing we continue to support annotation and editorial context for the collections.

Revising the Guidelines [Grant Announcements]

Mr. Smock said that the current guidelines [grant announcements] need to be redrafted, and Mr. Stroup agreed that the notion of free access is complex and that there is a lack of public knowledge about what it entails. Mr. Randolph said that if we move to a common repository than common standards must apply, and he does not see the need to go beyond four years to implement such standards. Mr. Miles suggested setting a marker in the guidelines but not enforce it in this forthcoming round of grants; we could delay guidelines and pursue the idea of a common repository.

In reply to this discussion, Ms. Williams reiterated her thoughts about delaying action. She suggested that although putting PDFs online as part of free online access strategy may not be ideal, but it is step in the right direction. Mr. Miles suggested a plan of over the course of the next 12-15 months having the Commission develop guidelines in anticipation of long-term editorial output standards for general public access. Ms. Williams countered that the Commission has been thinking of access for many years now and telling the projects to work toward that end.

Some projects, Mr. Thomas argued, can't handle what the staff has suggested. A common repository would take some of the burden away. Such a project could be a competitive grant, and he encouraged the staff to beef up the transition grants and to make the project aware of new digital editing and open access questions.

Costs and Timetable for a Common Repository

Ms. Barber said that developing a common repository would take a long time, and Ms. Williams echoed her remarks, saying that a common repository would be a heavy lift, given the NHPRC resources, and would have to be a long-term goal. Mr. Miles understood the desire for results but his concern is that projects create products that become quickly obsolete. Mr. Smock said that we have to find ways to make the work more enduring, and he asked how much the Founders Online cost. Ms. Williams said that the conversion project was \$2 million, but that she had no idea what the costs might be for a similar project with the DPLA for a common repository. Mr. Smock observed that it is a substantial amount of money and that annual grants for maintenance might make a central repository an impossible goal.

At the urging of Mr. Randolph, Mr. Wicentowski shared the experience of the State Department with the *Foreign Relations of the United States* documentary edition digitization, pointing out the distinction between digitizing existing books and the costs of unifying the whole into a common format, estimating the effective cost at \$1 per page. Five or ten years ago, he said, it would have been difficult to publish online as a digital edition, but a print-only version now would be short-sighted. He reiterated the offer to assist transition projects with technical assistance.

Next Steps

At the conclusion of this discussion, Ms. Williams asked about next steps. Mr. Smock volunteered to have the Executive Committee work with the NHPRC staff on summarizing the public comments and making recommendations to the full Commission regarding revisions to the draft grant announcements. A general conversation followed about the timeline for such changes and how issuing the announcements are the first steps in a funding cycle. Ms. Williams said that the issues in the other categories, which were not discussed, could be more easily remedied after review of public comments. Mr. Gottlieb commented on the proposed schedule and general discussion, saying that we should not let the public comment period delay the entire process. There were several questions raised about delaying the new announcements for various timeframes, but it was pointed out that such delays have consequences for potential grantees. Given these circumstances and the fact that there are no grant active announcements currently in place for applicants to apply against, expediting the process was the consensus of the Commission members.

At the conclusion of these discussions, the Commission unanimously passed a motion to have the Executive Committee:

- review and report back to the full Commission on the public comments received
- work with the staff on recommendations to the full Commission regarding the draft grant announcements
- adopt the time table proposed in “scenario one”

The Executive Committee would begin its work immediately and prepare its comments and recommendations for consideration at the Commission's April 2014 virtual meeting, to be scheduled for mid April. The goal is to publish the final, approved grant announcements by April 15, 2014.

[The Commission adjourned at 3:30 PM]