Review of Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World

Ben Goldman
Penn State University, bmg17@psu.edu

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In the seventh season of the fantasy television series *Game of Thrones*, one of the principal characters is found at the Citadel, a university-like institution that is home to an order of patriarchal scholars and intellectuals, called "maesters," who are considered experts in history, medicine, and religion. Samwell Tarly, who has always dreamed of availing himself of the Citadel's great library, has come to search for historical information that will help humanity navigate a looming, global existential threat. Instead, his research is stymied by bureaucratic distractions, unexplained restrictions on access, and administrators who prove themselves to be completely disinterested in understanding how the knowledge they steward may be of use beyond the walls of their library to make the world a better place. In a fit of frustration and anger, Samwell raids the collections in the dead of night and bitterly departs the temple of knowledge he once held in such high regard.

In many different forms over decades of archival literature, archivists have asked this central question: what is the point of archives? Philosophically, many have coalesced around the simple answer that Theodore Schellenberg provided in 1965: "Use is the end of all archival effort."[1] In practice, however, the fictional experience of would-be archival researcher Samwell Tarly is one that may strike a little too close to home for some professionals. Collections remain inaccessible or unused for a variety of reasons, including lack of resources, access restrictions, organizational inefficiencies, or because they insufficiently represent the experiences and research interests found in our pluralistic society. These are all worthy challenges for the profession to address, but the modern American archival profession has largely sought to do so within a business-as-usual mindset, assuming a future stability that matches the relative social stability of the past. Meanwhile, outside our institutions, the risks of significant social disruption due to societal inequalities or environmental degradation grow.

Like the fictional world of *Game of Thrones*, our real world has its own looming, global existential crisis that, whether archivists acknowledge it or not, will have considerable impacts on collections and the people that use, steward, and fund them. In 2018, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a special report (its fortieth report since it began publishing them in 1990[2]), which estimated that humanity will bypass an important 1.5 degrees Celsius warming limit set in the Paris accords *within the next three to ten years*, a threshold at which scientists agree the global impacts of climate change are expected to be irreversible and increasingly disastrous for all life on Earth. While such predictions can be paralyzing, they can also be clarifying. Many archivists, librarians, museum curators, and built heritage professionals are beginning to position their work within a broader concern for the present environmental crisis. For Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, author of *Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World*, externally driven disruptions like

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[1] Theodore R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).
[2] United Nations International Panel on Climate Change, Reports, accessed April 11, 2019, https://www.ipcc.ch/reports/.

climate change reinforce her conviction that libraries exist to help make the world a better place, and can only effectively accomplish that goal through deep engagement with the communities they serve.

Sustainable Thinking is divided into four sections that progressively build the case for "thinking holistically and systematically about the sustainability of our local and global communities" in order to "position libraries for the future in the strongest way possible."[3] This is as close as the book comes to an outright statement of purpose. All common meanings of "sustainability" are on display here. Sustainability is defined as the "capacity to endure"; it refers to any activity that meets the needs of the present without sacrificing the needs of the future; it is viewed through the lens of the *triple bottom line*, a framework that seeks balance between profit (economic feasibility), people (social equity), and the planet (environmental stewardship). Throughout the book, Aldrich transitions deftly from different applications of these core concepts, explaining how libraries can both strategically employ a triple–bottom line framework while also empowering and supporting local communities seeking greater sustainability.

The first section of the book is comprised of five chapters that attempt to define the situation in which libraries currently find themselves. The book begins by referencing surveys that have for many years noted a downward trend in public use of library services and a deepening confusion over the role libraries play in contemporary society, and then sets to contextualizing these trends. Examples of the many external disruptions that affect libraries—political, economic, technological, environmental, and social—are explored in some detail. The topic of climate change is given its own chapter ("Survive the Earth"), which includes an activity aimed at getting readers to reflect on the climate-driven disruptions that might impact their local communities. This section concludes by noting how well positioned libraries are to support IPCC principles for resilience, despite the lack of public awareness of these strengths. The tension between what libraries are good at and what they are publicly recognized for is a thread that underlies much of this book.

The second section guides readers through a progression of strategies designed to help libraries identify and communicate value through the lens of sustainability. Much of the material explored here (for instance, how to approach strategic planning, conceptualizing sustainability, or the core values of libraries) summarizes knowledge drawn from elsewhere, but Aldrich effectively scaffolds the information to help readers form a coherent strategy for sustainability. The first significant steps toward sustainability, she argues, can be found through a thorough interrogation of our values, the prioritization of programs and services that "empower, engage, and energize" users, and an intense, proactive outreach effort to the local community. The section concludes with chapters that explain the triple bottom line and urge readers to push past the concept of

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[3] Rebekkah Smith Aldrich, *Sustainable Thinking: Ensuring Your Library's Future in an Uncertain World* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2018).

sustainability into what she deems more proactive and positive explorations of resiliency and regeneration.

Chapters 14 and 15 on resilience and regeneration, while well intentioned, fall somewhat flat. Useful planning worksheets conclude these chapters, but some of the examples (e.g., hacking the world "for good," or makerspaces) feel worn, or at least not completely analogous with the overarching themes of the book. Though such programs might indeed be examples of effective library engagement with communities, more compelling examples of libraries responding to or planning in advance of urgent societal disruptions would have been welcome here. For example, Aldrich references a traumatizing event like the 2017 "Unite the Right" white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, but misses an opportunity to mention the exemplary initiative undertaken by librarians at the University of Virginia to form a community-driven digital collection around the event.[4]

Tactics are explored in more depth in the third section of the book. From a discussion of change management, to infusing institutions with sustainability thinking, to including sustainable approaches when undertaking renovation projects, these concluding chapters are centered on how individuals can lead the charge for adopting sustainable strategies in an organization. Chapter 20 provides the most detail on specific tactics, as drawn from the Sustainability Library Certification Program developed by the Sustainability Initiative Committee in the New York Library Association (NYLA-SI), and modeled on the US Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program. Also of note is the discussion on ecological intelligence found in chapter 23, which may lead archivists, for instance, to think more carefully about the consumer life cycle of products that cross the collection manager's path. From where do archival supply companies source the paper for boxes and folders? What are the waste streams for discarded paper, computer media, or obsolete audio and video formats?[5]

Overall, Aldrich has written a compact, accessible, and useful book that should be actionable for any public library that cares about sustainability. But what are *archivists* to do with this book? While it may have been written for public libraries, the book offers perspectives and activities that could certainly help archivists work through their institution's capacity to endure and ability to support the sustainability of their local communities. In particular, this book highlights two potential avenues for archives and archivists to focus on sustainability: instigating a broader professional dialogue and exploring opportunities for deeper community engagement.

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[4] University of Virginia Library, "Unite the Right" Rally and Community Response," accessed April 9, 2019, http://digitalcollecting.lib.virginia.edu/rally/.

[5] For information on digital preservation and e-waste, see Linda Tadic, "The Environmental Impact of Digital Preservation," presented at the Association of Moving Image Archivists, Portland, OR, November 2015, accessed April 9, 2019, https://www.digitalbedrock.com/resources.

In some respects, this book is a reminder how far the archival profession is behind affiliated cultural heritage professions in adequately exploring issues like sustainability and climate change. Museum and built heritage professionals, in particular, have published volumes that reposition their work in the era of climate change.[6] The American Library Association (ALA) has an active Sustainability Round Table (Aldrich helped found it), which was primarily responsible for an ALA Council resolution in early 2019 adopting sustainability as a core value of librarianship.[7] Where in the American archival profession do archivists convene to discuss their work in the era of climate change?[8] Where is the monograph that gathers perspectives from across the profession, evaluating our professional strengths, values, and services, in light of the already-occurring climate disruptions? With seasonally recurring weather-related disasters (hurricanes, flooding, wildfires) now becoming the status quo, where is the profession-wide urgency to protect and preserve archival collections? Where is the organized effort to reconsider our facilities standards, our disaster plans? *Sustainable Thinking* offers several examples of ways that professional library organizations have begun to organize their member activities related to sustainability. In particular, archivists could learn much from the work of NYLA-SI, explained in chapter 18.

While having broader professional conversations about sustainability is desirable, *Sustainable Thinking* is adamant that institutions must deeply and persistently engage their local communities in order to remain relevant and advance the cause of sustainability. Community engagement is hard work, yet Aldrich passionately urges librarians to get better at communicating their purpose and societal value to support this engagement. But are archivists good at this kind of self-advocacy? As Mark Greene noted in his presidential address at the Society of American Archivists' Annual Conference in 2008, archivists have historically tended to identify themselves through their core functions (*what* they do), rather than their purpose (*why* they do it).[9] Aldrich might argue that without a clear and compelling message that explains *why* archives and

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[6] For examples, see David Harvey and Jim Perry, eds., *The Future of Heritage as Climates Change: Loss, Adaptation and Creativity* (London: Routledge, 2015); Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin, and Kirsten Wehner, eds., *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

[7] "Resolution for the Adoption of Sustainability as a Core Value of Librarianship," American Library Association, accessed April 11, 2019, http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/governance/council/council_documents/2019_ms_council_docs/ALA%20CD%2037%20RESOLUTION%20FOR%20THE%20ADOPTION%20OF%20SUSTAINABILITY%20AS%20A%20CORE%20VALUE%20OF%20LIBRARIANSHIP_Final1182019.pdf.

[8] Some modest though notable efforts originating within the archival profession include ProjectARCC (Archivists Responding to Climate Change), and the Libraries and Archives in the Anthropocene Colloquium at New York University, May 13–14, 2017. See https://projectarcc.org/ and https://litwinbooks.com/laac2017colloq.php, respectively. The Society of American Archivists' Committee on Public Policy has also published an issue brief on archives and the environment. For more information, see https://www2.archivists.org/statements/information-brief-archives-and-the-environment. More recently, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of ACRL/ALA organized their 2019 annual conference around the topic of climate change. For more information, see http://conference.rbms.info/2019/.

[9] Mark Greene, "The Power of Archives: Archivists' Values and Value in the Postmodern Age (with an Introduction by Dennis Meissner)," *The American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009): 13–41.

archivists are important for society, they will be unsuccessful in keeping their work relevant to the functional health of the communities they serve, especially as environmental challenges grow. The intense community and user service focus of public libraries would seemingly better position them to weather disruptions. Archives, however, might need to reconsider their approaches to working with (and within) communities. Professional dialogues around community archives these past few years may offer archivists useful insights for meaningful (and equitable) engagement.

Aldrich neglects one climate-driven factor that will likely challenge the ability of librarians and archivists to remain responsive to community needs. Chapter 10 offers a passionate statement in support of libraries thinking and acting locally, but climate change promises to disrupt and reshape "local" communities in ways we cannot yet fathom. According to one study, 400,000 Puerto Ricans relocated to the United States over a five-month span after Hurricane Maria.[10] What, then, might community engagement look like to the archives and public libraries in Puerto Rico when so many of its users have been displaced beyond its borders? How might archives or public libraries in Florida, New York, and Pennsylvania, where many post-hurricane Puerto Rican refugee communities are concentrated, remain responsive to these shifting demographics? It would seem important for an institution's concept of "local" to remain fungible enough so that such communities do not fall through the gaps. In light of these possibilities, several of the book's end-of-chapter exercises targeting local communities might require constant review to remain relevant in times of upheaval.

While archives are not nearly as community-centered as the average public library, *Sustainable Thinking* suggests that archivists might consider new opportunities for engagement. Particularly compelling is the notion that libraries (and, it could be argued, archives) have a role in communities as first *restorers*. Rather than including libraries under the general designation of first *responders* that mobilize within a community right after a disaster or disruptive event, Aldrich proposes viewing libraries as crucial to the phase that comes after—helping communities "pick up the pieces and find their way forward." The "Unite the Right" digital collection at the University of Virginia offers one example of the restorative power of archives, serving as both a platform for remembrance and a tool for emotional repair within the community. As horrifying as the white supremacy rally in Charlottesville was, archivists should keep in mind that the impacts can extend beyond our own communities, and in certain cases the stakes may even be higher: the reconstruction of government records after genocide,[11] the complete dislocation of an

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[10] Martín Echenique and Luis Melgar, "Mapping Puerto Rico's Hurricane Migration with Mobile Phone Data," Citylab, May 11, 2018, https://www.citylab.com/environment/2018/05/watch-puerto-ricos-hurricane-migration-via-mobile-phone-data/559889/.

[11] Michelle Caswell, "Khmer Rouge Archives: Accountability, Truth, and Memory in Cambodia," *Archival Science* 10, no. 1 (2010): 25–44.

entire nation and all its heritage,[12] or the role of records in preventing the widespread pollution of American drinking water by natural gas development.[13] In these examples, archives are more than just sources of historical information for purposes of academic research; they are essential, irreplaceable resources for accountability, truth, human health, and identity—ideals that enable life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is difficult yet essential for archivists to ponder the urgency of such dire examples, and the implications for collecting. For a profession that names itself the steward of documentary evidence used to interpret and understand history, there has been insufficient discussion around the role archivists must play in preserving documentation that will help future generations understand the causes, impacts, and legacies of human-driven climate change, let alone survive them. Several archivists writing in the early 1990s were concerned enough about the state of the environment to explore this topic,[14] but few today seem dedicated to investigating it. Among all the important societal challenges faced in the world, climate change stands as the defining issue of the human species in our time. As one notable climate scientist put it in 2018, "What we do over the next 10 years will determine the future of humanity for the next 10,000 years."[15] Whether and how individuals, communities, and organizations respond in the face of this challenge should be a priority for archival collection assessment, development, and appraisal efforts everywhere.

Perhaps owing to its focus on public libraries, *Sustainable Thinking* does not spend much time scrutinizing professional practices, a small but noticeable shortcoming that prevents the book from having broader utility. Reappraisal, deaccessioning, and minimal processing are archival strategies that have become formalized in the past decade, and one might argue that these all represent organized attempts at professionally sustainable practices. Such endeavors, however, cannot be viewed as sustainable if they do not also consider social equity and environmental stewardship. Triple bottom line accounting might also suggest that archivists evaluate: the carbon footprint of digital and analog storage environments;[16] whether collections adequately represent the diversity of viewpoints found in society; the cultural competency of legacy

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[12] Matthew Gordon-Clark, "Paradise Lost? Pacific Island Archives Threatened by Climate Change," *Archival Science* 12, no. 1 (2012): 51–67.
[13] Eira Tansey, "Regulation Requires Records: Access to Fracking Information in the Marcellus/Utica Shale Formations," *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018), http://doi.org/10.5334/kula.21.
[14] See Candace Loewen, "From Human Neglect to Planetary Survival: New Approaches to the Appraisal of Environmental Records," *Archivaria* 33 (1991): 87–103; Hugh A. Taylor, "Recycling the Past: The Archivist in the Age of Ecology," *Archivaria* 35 (1992): 203–13; Stephen C. Sturgeon, "A Different Shade of Green: Documenting Environmental Racism and Justice," *Archival Issues* (1996): 33–46; Todd Welch, "'Green' Archivism: The Archival Response to Environmental Research," *The American Archivist* 62, no. 1 (1999): 74–94.
[15] Fred Pearce, "Geoengineer the Planet? More Scientists Now Say It Must Be an Option," *Yale Environment 360*, May 29, 2019, https://e360.yale.edu/features/geoengineer-the-planet-more-scientists-now-say-it-must-be-an-option.
[16] Keith L. Pendergrass, Walker Sampson, Tim Walsh, and Laura Alagna, "Toward Environmentally Sustainable Digital Preservation," *The American Archivist* 82, no. 1 (2019): 165–206.

descriptive efforts; or the irrelevance of digitization in communities where access to broadband is limited. The dangers of climate change, in particular, might suggest a closer evaluation of the severe weather-related risks to institutions,[17] or warrant across-the-board professional adaptation planning.[18] Aldrich might argue that such changes in practice will not stick, nor be effective, without organizational buy-in, explored in later chapters. While her examples (e.g., library trustees) might not always apply to archival institutions, archivists would be wise to approach such changes through whatever existing organizational structures exist to set policy, decide strategic priorities, maintain facilities, or perform advocacy.

For all its merits, *Sustainable Thinking* largely suffers from the same business-as-usual approach to the topic of climate change that has impaired societal responses to the extinction-level crisis humanity now faces. The way of life we have enjoyed in the developed world can no longer continue unaltered if we hope to correct our present trajectory toward total environmental collapse. Aldrich clearly understands the stakes, counseling that in the worst possible future scenarios, archives and libraries might be valued for their capacity to help people survive. In one striking discussion early in her book, she examines Maslow's hierarchy of needs, pointing out the risk in continuing to align library services with higher levels of the hierarchy like "self-actualization" when the future may considerably refocus communities and individuals on foundational needs like basic employment, health, safety, food security, or access to clean water. Despite this acknowledgment, the assumption underlying the book seems to be that public libraries, as we presently conceive them, have the tools and ideas necessary to support the needs of their communities through this crisis, when a more appropriate response might be to question, as Bethany Nowviskie has,[19] how the library and archival professions must change, even drastically, in response to an unfathomable future environmental reality. Aldrich can hardly be faulted for this shortcoming, for the changes likely to be endured by the information professions are equally unfathomable. *Sustainable Thinking* succeeds in positioning sustainability as a core concern for the profession, and will hopefully preface these difficult and necessary professional dialogues to come.

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[17] Tara Mazurczyk, Nathan Piekielek, Eira Tansey, and Ben Goldman, "American Archives and Climate Change: Risks and Adaptation," *Climate Risk Management* 20 (2018): 111–25.

[18] Eira Tansey, "Archival Adaptation to Climate Change," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy* 11, no. 2 (2015): 45–56.

[19] Bethany Nowviskie, "Change Us, Too," blog, June 30, 2019, http://nowviskie.org/2019/change-us-too/.

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