

Viewpoint

The Power of Archives

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When Donald Trump left the White House in January 2021, photographers waiting outside captured images of staff removing his belongings. Some of these were personnel from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) carrying crates labelled ‘Presidential Library’. The subsequent discussions online and in the press spoke volumes not just about views of Trump and his legacy but also about attitudes to history, memory and identity, and the central role that archives and records play in these. This viewpoint examines some of these themes and considers how they are relevant to archives in Scotland.¹

What does the debate over Trump’s records tell us about the nature and power of archives? The presidential library system in America was started by Franklin D. Roosevelt who, in 1939, gave his papers to the US federal government, with money being raised privately to build a library to hold them. Prior to this, presidential papers had often been destroyed, lost or dispersed. Roosevelt’s actions were copied by subsequent presidents and the 1955 Presidential Libraries Act formalised the system of libraries being built with private funds and subsequently maintained by federal authorities, with NARA responsible for their operation. The libraries were a national acknowledgement of the importance of preserving archival material for future study and research and a public recognition that the papers ‘belong to the American people’.²

On 18 January 2021 the television programme *Have I Got News For You* tweeted, ‘Speculation builds over the quality of Donald Trump’s presidential library after archivists discover extensive crayon damage to Mr Sneeze and Mr Topsy-Turvy’.³ This typically acerbic comment, implying as it does that there would be little to put in a Trump presidential library, coincided with several articles in the press speculating as to whether a traditional library would be built, either because Trump had no interest in such things or because he would be unable to raise funds.⁴ Other commentators questioned whether Trump should be allowed to have a library at all, arguing that he would use it to perpetuate lies,

¹ This paper is based on a talk delivered to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in collaboration with the Scottish Records Association, February 2021.

² From the NARA website at <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/about>.

³ Twitter feed at <https://twitter.com/haveigotnews/status/1351161920649383940>.

⁴ *Politico*, 22 January 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/22/trump-presidential-library-plans-461383>.

to put a gloss on his presidency or as an act of self-aggrandisement. An article in *The Washington Post* caused outrage among Trump supporters by declaring ‘Trump wants a library. He must never have one.’⁵

Reading through the articles and commentary, and scrolling through the spoof Trump library website which appeared at the end of 2020,⁶ it is clear that presidential libraries take on multiple meanings and that the archives and records they contain are preserved for many reasons. Archives are kept as a historical record, as evidence of past activity or at least as a way of finding out about an event in the past. They are not necessarily the ‘truth’, and the user requires an understanding of their provenance, the context of their creation and use, and their journey to today to be able to judge their evidential value. The user also needs to be aware of their own prejudices and background as these may encourage a particularly personal interpretation of a record. Understanding this, and developing proficiencies in interrogating archives, can help individuals and societies better deal with today’s information. In an era of fake news and disinformation, archives and archival skills give us more confidence in understanding and interpreting the present and past.⁷

A presidential library, an archive or collection might be said to be representative of an individual or community in that it provides an albeit limited mirror or snapshot of activity.⁸ It provides the sliver through which the individual or community will be seen in future; in other words it dictates, to an extent, who will be remembered and how. As many writers have argued, this gives the archive, and archivist, power; to quote Derrida, ‘There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.’⁹ Critics might fear what will be included in Trump’s library but they also fear what might be missing. An archive might seek to be representative but by choosing what is recorded and what is preserved, creators and archivists can easily be exclusive, even if any bias is unconscious. Presidential libraries, like archives, tell stories and presidents, like archivists, choose which stories are told and how they are told. Archives are as much about forgetting as remembering and some things may be deliberately forgotten or destroyed; indeed, the very fact of putting something into an archive

⁵ *The Washington Post*, 28 January 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/trump-presidential-library/2021/01/27/4ea5e8c0-5fed-11eb-9430-e7c77b5b0297_story.html.

⁶ <https://djtrumplibrary.com>.

⁷ See for example L. Duranti, ‘Whose Truth. Records and archives as evidence in the era of post-truth and disinformation’, in (ed.) C. Brown, *Archival Futures* (London, 2018), 19–32.

⁸ Archival literature contains many references to these themes, see for example. M. Caswell, A. A. Migoni, N. Geraci and M. Cifor, ‘“To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise”: community archives and the importance of representation’, *Archives and Records*, 38:1 (2017), 5–26.

⁹ J. Derrida, ‘Archives Fever: a Freudian Impression’, *Diacritics*, 25:2 (1995), 11.

could be seen as an act of forgetting.¹⁰ On a very practical level, in the case of Trump's library, critics might fear deliberate exclusion especially given reports from earlier in his presidency of shredded documents.¹¹

This points to the role of archives and records in holding organisations and individuals to account. The *Guardian* article above highlights both poor record-keeping practices in the White House and deliberate destruction, a combination of not caring about managing or keeping records and not wanting to retain evidence that might in future be used against the administration. History provides many examples of records being deliberately destroyed to prevent the actions of governments coming to light or institutions being held to account, and today's news frequently contains reports of government business being done through private email accounts or WhatsApp. According to one commentator, 'the British state now fights transparency by any means necessary'.¹² Any presidential library will contain material that can be used to examine the actions of the administration; allowing access to these papers encourages democracy and transparency and supports human rights. The links between archives and social justice have been extensively explored in archival literature.¹³ Preserving the papers of a president is reflective of a just society, one which seeks to allow access to information which may support and enrich its citizens.

Presidential libraries form part of America's memory. The archives and records, the exhibitions and even the buildings themselves are a form of collective remembrance or memorialisation. The concept of a presidential library has evolved to become an integral part of American democracy and identity. As such, the archives they contain have an almost symbolic value, operating as objects as well as information carriers in the way James O'Toole suggests.¹⁴ This is why Barack Obama's plans for a library caused more controversy than the recent discussions about Donald Trump. Obama made the decision not to construct a presidential library, building instead a presidential centre to commemorate his time in office, 'a working centre for citizenship, telling the story of the Obama Administration' and including a privately funded museum.¹⁵ Under this model NARA will take physical custody of the archive and the

¹⁰ For an exploration of the links between archives and forgetting, see V. Harris, 'Genres of the trace: memories, archives and trouble', *Archives and Manuscripts*, 40:3 (2012), 147–57.

¹¹ See, for example, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/17/historians-having-to-tape-together-records-that-trump-tore-up>.

¹² *Financial Times*, 20 August 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/7836a4dc-e11f-4fc7-a7aa-f08115d3a0a5>.

¹³ For example R. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability and Social Justice* (Chicago, 2009) and V. Harris, *Archives and Justice* (Chicago, 2007).

¹⁴ J. O'Toole, 'The Symbolic Significance of Archives', *The American Archivist*, 56:2 (1996), 234–55.

¹⁵ The Obama Presidential Centre website, <https://www.obama.org/updates/obama-foundation-nara-announce-new-details-obama-presidential-center-structure-operations/>.

presidential centre will fund their digitisation.¹⁶ This has interesting implications for our concept of archives as a place, given that the physical archive will be separated from the building which is the focus of the memorialisation. It makes more sense, however, when we remember that the vast majority of the archive is already digital – NARA took over 300 million emails. The archive exists and will be accessed virtually; indeed, while arguments continue about the building of the presidential centre, Obama’s presidential library already exists online as does that of Donald Trump.¹⁷

Exploring attitudes to presidential libraries reinforces the relevance of archives to the present, their potential to hold organisations to account and to support justice, their role in creating and preserving memories and identities, and their symbolic role. We are reminded of the possibility of gaps in the archive, their potential to be manipulated and the potentially ambiguous relationship between archives and trust and the truth. We are reminded of the power of archives. Richard Ovenden’s masterly survey of the role and importance of libraries and archives through the ages, *Burning the Books*, takes us on a journey through all these themes.¹⁸ He explores how war and neglect led to the loss of knowledge in the ancient world and to the decline of great libraries such as the one at Alexandria. He discusses how a particular knowledge, culture and way of life was purposely targeted during the Reformation with the dissolution of the monasteries and the subsequent destruction of their libraries and archives. He clearly demonstrates the connection between collections of books and archives, and the sense of identity of individuals and communities, by citing numerous occasions where that identity has been threatened due to deliberate destruction. In the 1990s, for example, the Serbs deliberately targeted Bosnian libraries and archives, destroying an estimated two million volumes and 480,000 metres of archives.

Archives and records have often been collected and used as instruments of control (Ovenden references the East German Stasi files), and these archives can subsequently be used to hold organisations to account, a fact recognised by regimes who hurry to destroy records before a transfer of power. This happened at the end of the South Africa Apartheid government as Verne Harris has shown.¹⁹ Countries gaining independence often found themselves bereft of part of their history as the withdrawing colonial powers took records with them. In 2012 such a case was exposed in the UK with the revelation that files revealing the torture of Mau Mau Kenyans by British authorities had been removed from the context and country of their creation and kept hidden by the Foreign Office.²⁰ The topic

¹⁶ From the NARA website, <https://www.archives.gov/presidential-libraries/information-about-new-model-for-obama-presidential-library>.

¹⁷ See <https://www.obamalibrary.gov> and <https://www.trumplibary.gov>.

¹⁸ R. Ovenden, *Burning the Books* (London, 2020).

¹⁹ Harris has written extensively about archives in South Africa, see for example ‘The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory and Archives in South Africa’, *Archival Science*, 2 (2002), 63–86.

²⁰ BBC News, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13336343>.

of displaced archives is still very much a live one²¹ and does not relate solely to the colonial period. Ovenden uses the example of the Baath party archives in Iraq which were discovered in 2003 after the American invasion by Kanan Makiya, a scholar and campaigner. The archive was transferred to the USA for safekeeping but for many American archivists and Iraqis this was a simple act of plunder. It was not until 2020 that all the material was returned to Iraq.²²

All of these examples show the power of archives, but they also remind us that archives are about people. The Kenyan files may be used to hold the British government to account but they also protect the rights of individuals and they may be the only place where the lives and actions of these individuals are documented. Archives are powerful but they are often created by the powerful and record what the powerful want to be remembered. Many voices do not appear in our archives, many people are not remembered, archives are as often as much about forgetting as remembering.

Presidential libraries, ancient Egypt, colonialism and war reveal the link between archives and issues that are key to our societies but what can an understanding of these themes bring to those of us who are interested in archives and records in Scotland? And how might they translate to inform the work of an archivist in a university in Dundee? To start we need look no further than Princess Street in Edinburgh, home to one of the world's oldest custom-built archive buildings still in use. Completed in 1788, General Register House was constructed to preserve Scotland's records but the grand design of the building, a central part of the plans for New Town, is reminiscent of the symbolism of the presidential libraries. General Register House made a statement about the importance of the nation's records and their place in the heart of the capital as part of Scotland's collective memory.

Today's news is full of examples of archives and records being used to hold institutions to account and these records, or lack of them, or their poor management, having an impact on people's rights and lives. The importance of records in supporting accountability and transparency in government was seen when the Holyrood inquiry into the Scottish government's investigation of Alex Salmond was told that minutes of crucial meetings were 'missing' or not recorded in the first place.²³ Incidents often involve record-keeping failures putting personal data at risk as with the patient records found at the abandoned Strathmartine Hospital²⁴ or undeleted information on USB drives.²⁵ Scotland

²¹ See (ed.) J. Lowry, *Displaced Archives* (London, 2019).

²² *The Wall Street Journal*, 31 August 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/baath-party-archives-return-to-iraq-with-the-secrets-they-contain-11598907600>.

²³ STV News, 5 March 2021, <https://news.stv.tv/politics/no-minutes-held-of-key-legal-meetings-in-salmond-case>.

²⁴ BBC News, 2 May 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/tayside_and_central/7414319.stm.

²⁵ BBC News, 3 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-tayside-central-54779322>.

and the rest of the UK also has its own example of the rights and identities of individuals from minority groups being threatened by those in power because of destroyed, missing or non-existent documentation. The recent Windrush scandal saw thousands threatened with deportation because they lacked the paperwork to prove that they were in the UK legally.²⁶

Investigations into allegations of abuse rely heavily on archives, records and recorded testimonies. The Historic Abuse Systemic Review, also known as the Shaw Report and published in 2007, was the result of investigations into failings in the provision of residential childcare in Scotland with particular focus on abuse of children in residential schools and children's homes. The report disclosed failures in record-keeping which had an impact on whether evidence could be obtained and highlighted the central role that records play in creating our own identities and formalising our place as citizens. Many former residents were unable to get access to their own records and thus were deprived of information about themselves, their histories and their lives. They were deprived of a part of who they were.²⁷ The Shaw Report led directly to the Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011, a recognition by government of the importance of good record-keeping and the role of records in the 'relationship between public authorities and the millions who depend on them for good civic administration'.²⁸ More recently, the power of archives has been demonstrated by some archivists being recognised as key workers during lockdown, so that they could spend time in their repositories gathering evidence for the current Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.²⁹

Lawyers for the Infected Blood Inquiry³⁰ visited our archive at Dundee University for a couple of weeks in 2019. As the custodians of the archives of NHS Tayside, we see frequent examples of people accessing our records to reconnect with their past or that of their relatives, often with the intent of finding information that may right wrongs, highlight inadequacies or provide comfort and closure. As evidence of past activity, all our archives have the potential to do this – there are the obvious collections such as research data into the impact of nuclear testing on war veterans but also the more mundane such as building plans for our university buildings which might demonstrate the presence of asbestos. As well as supporting accountability and justice, our collections demonstrate the importance of archives in other ways, such as creating and preserving memories and supporting a sense of identity and community.

Our archive acts as a corporate memory for the University, providing information about decisions of the past which help it understand the present

²⁶ BBC News, 31 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43782241>.

²⁷ T. Shaw, *Historical Abuse Systemic Review*, Appendix 3 (Edinburgh, 2007), 211–65.

²⁸ B. Longmore, 'The Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011: creating a culture that values public records', *Archives and Records*, 34:2 (2013), 248–62.

²⁹ <https://www.childabuseinquiry.scot>.

³⁰ <https://www.infectedbloodinquiry.org.uk>.

and plan for the future. It can use this memory and understanding to build an identity for itself, for example, by positioning the success of Life Sciences in the context of a long tradition of scientific innovation reaching back to the first professor of Natural History, the pioneering mathematical biologist D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson. Staff and students are part of a living community which is based around their connection with the University and strengthened by an understanding of where we have come from and an almost subconscious sense of belonging that knowledge of our histories and heritage supported by archives and records can bring. Our public engagement and outreach work is based on a belief in the importance of archives in helping us understand who we are and in bringing communities together. We work with reminiscence groups to use archives to prompt memories about the past and discussions of shared experiences. Our local collections are used with schoolchildren to encourage them to explore how their own personal experiences compare to those of people in the past; providing a local and relatable historical context is an effective way of promoting understanding of and encouraging discussion about current issues on the curriculum. My colleague Jan Merchant has developed a project investigating the history of one of the city's parks involving schoolchildren, local community groups and the city council. She has created a walking trail with stories created by the children which is being used by researchers in the University to study the impact of city parks on people's physical and mental health.³¹

We often find that encouraging people to access and use archives promotes their sense of well-being and self-worth. This is for many reasons – archives encourage understanding, give opportunities for remembering and reminiscence and provide the context to have meaningful or difficult conversations about current issues. They bring people together and encourage creativity. We find that some people think that they are just for academics and are difficult to access so are delighted when we stress that 'our' archives are 'their' archives just as the contents of the presidential libraries 'belong to the American people'. This is reinforced when people can recognise themselves, their relatives or just people like themselves in the collections, bringing us back to my earlier point about representation, power and who is remembered. How can we ensure that our collections are representative and don't just tell the story of the powerful, the majority or those who already have a voice? At Dundee we currently have two projects under way which seek to do this. One is a research project that looks at the origins of the University and its funding, and which seeks a better understanding of where the money used to endow the institution originated and to acknowledge the connections to all who contributed to that wealth whether workers in Dundee's mills, people in the colonies or slaves in plantations. The other is an oral history project to capture the thoughts of as diverse a range of people in Dundee as possible to ensure that they have a place in the archive but also to work in partnership with community groups to discuss how they might create and preserve their own recorded memories and archives.

³¹ <https://www.bigbackgarden.com>.

Two projects undertaken by the University Archives encapsulate the many, varied and often complex ways in which archives contribute to society. Strathmartine Hospital Histories³² was a Heritage Lottery Fund project in collaboration with the Thera Trust, a charity for people with learning disabilities, and members of the University's social work department. The aim was to record the stories of people who had been connected to the hospital which had begun life as an 'asylum for imbecile children' and later expanded to provide care for people with learning and mental health difficulties. It had been closed in 2003 with care for former residents mainly moved into the community and the project aimed to record evidence showing the failings of institutionalised care that could be used in training and policy formation, which to some extent it did. However, paradoxically, some people wanted to recall positive experiences, demonstrating how the past is never black and white. For all those who took part, though, there was a sense of empowerment: somebody wants to listen to me, and more than this, somebody wants to make sure my views and experiences are recorded and preserved in an archive. Some former residents visited the archives and we also had travelling exhibitions giving participants and others the opportunity to see archival material. Many former residents and staff had no records or mementos to use to help recall their time at the hospital, so their interaction with the archives gave them the chance to rekindle these memories and, for some, clearly added something to their sense of identity: this is where I was, this is part of me. The archives also helped to bring together a community of people who had been dispersed and reconnected old friends and colleagues.

However, the project also clearly demonstrated the difficulties around remembering and the fact that people might prefer to forget or do not wish to be 'represented' in the archive of a university. We were asking people to talk about what were often difficult and emotional memories, and were dealing with vulnerable people. The experience demonstrated to me the difficulties and dangers of archives, archiving and remembering which is something we would like to explore further. These issues were discussed during another project working in partnership with mental health service users and the School of Nursing where we used archival material relating to Tayside's former asylums to discuss mental health care. In this case, however, the collections provided an opportunity and safe place to discuss current care – the past was a neutral lens through which to explore difficult issues. Again, we found that the material brought us together, creating a strong link between all involved in the project which I will not forget. The participants were also initially surprised but then pleased that we wanted to hear their opinions and to make sure that they were added to the archives. As one participant explained in their feedback:

Day 1 of the archives project, I wasn't sure what to expect. Were we going to be asked to look up a few case studies? Would we be allowed to touch the old books and see the original copies? Were the records paper or digital? I honestly didn't have

³² <http://www.strathmartinestories.co.uk/about-us/>.

a clue. THEN!!!! All I can say is WOW!!!! Nothing prepared me for the amazing mind-blowing things we saw, read about discussed and discovered ... To make improvements to our troubled Mental Health Service today, we need to look back through the years and compare notes.

And another said, 'I can honestly say that being a mental health patient for over 30 years this experience has got me buzzing. I'm feeling better and more positive than I have in a very long time.'

This is the power of archives and this is why we strive to demonstrate to our students at the University that archives are not just dusty old papers of relevance to a few historians. We try to connect with all disciplines using archives to inform their learning, to inspire debate and to encourage creativity. We work with medics, philosophers, educators, social scientists and art students, and increasingly find that use of the archives, particularly hands-on use, provides a unique and memorable learning experience. Students and their lecturers are often surprised about the relevance of archives to today's society.

One subject we have discussed with philosophy students is the process and consequence of remembering which we do through a comparison of physical and digital memory prompts or carriers. It is instructive, for example, to discuss the difference between a nineteenth-century photograph album and Facebook. We might frame this in the light of Nora's views:

No epoch has deliberately produced so many archives as ours, due alike to technical advances in reproduction and conservation and to our superstitious respect for these traces. As traditional memory fades, we feel obliged religiously to accumulate the testimonies, documents, images and visible signs of what was.³³

We might also discuss Lowenthal's comment in relation to the Internet:

On the one hand it offers more comprehensive and egalitarian access to the past and enhanced historical insights. On the other hand it threatens a surfeit of diffuse personal trivia, ... and the loss of durable social frameworks grounded in cumulative, discriminating and dynamic collective memories.³⁴

This description of the online environment brings us back to Trump's digital presidential library and so I will conclude with a very brief reflection on the impact of the digital world on archives. Many readers will be familiar with the evolving story that started with the announcement in 2010 by the Library of Congress that it would archive Twitter³⁵ which encapsulates many of the new or heightened challenges that digital delivers. It is worth scrolling through the comments in the

³³ P. Nora quotation, translated by D. Lowenthal, in idem, 'Archival perils: an historian's plaint', *Archives*, 114 (2006), 49–75, 57.

³⁴ D. Lowenthal, from an unpublished abstract for *Memory, Identity and the Archival Paradigm: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, a conference organised by the University of Dundee, 2010.

³⁵ Library of Congress Blog, 14 April 2010, <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2010/04/how-tweet-it-is-library-acquires-entire-twitter-archive/>.

blog as they read like a miniature summary of issues that archivists might face in a digital world: amount of data, ownership, copyright, relevance, privacy, access, preservation, funding and so on. Some of these problems, in particular difficulties in dealing with the amount of data and providing access to it, led to the Library announcing in 2017 that it would only be archiving selected Tweets. While the issues listed above are not unfamiliar to archivists – being challenges they face in the physical world – they are often amplified in the virtual one.

Despite the professional issues (how do you appraise Twitter?), the well-known technical problems (file format, obsolescence and so on) and despite the reservations of Lowenthal quoted above, the digital environment offers more opportunities for representative and participatory archiving. In January 2021 *Vice*, the American online news site, reported ‘Archivists are preserving Capitol Hill Riot Livestreams before they are deleted’,³⁶ referring to the social media evidence of participants in the Capitol Hill attack and community attempts to preserve these as evidence. The Syrian Archive is an online archive which aims to ‘preserve, enhance and memorialise documentation of human rights violations and other crimes committed by all parties to conflict in Syria for use in advocacy, justice and accountability’ by collecting visual evidence from a range of sources including journalists, citizens and social media.³⁷ However, as far as I can see neither of these projects involve professional archivists. The Capitol Hill archiving was done, initially at least, by IT specialists and hackers, and the Syrian archive is a collaboration of ‘researchers, journalists, historians, technologists and security experts’. So where here is there a role for archivists?

Again, there is nothing new here, archivists posed these questions with the rise of community archives in the late twentieth century and the answer, focusing on the professional knowledge and skills of the archivists, remains relevant. Lowenthal’s ‘surfeit of ... trivia’ requires someone either to decide what to keep and what not to keep or to decide on meaningful and accurate ways to find and access information. Sites such as the Occupy Archive,³⁸ which was last updated in 2012, require someone to continue to work on their long-term preservation and these people need to be around long after those involved in the movement are gone. Oviden, in *Burning the Books*, expressed his concern that information, knowledge and digital archives in today’s virtual world are in the hands of, and being controlled by, a few commercial companies who manipulate and reuse data, even personal data, in questionable ways. Despite calls by many archivists today for us not to be neutral (I would agree, how can we be neutral?) and for us to be activists,³⁹ preserving information for archival reasons requires more objectivity and long-sightedness than is held by those behind Google.

³⁶ *Vice*, 7 January 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3an5e3/archivists-are-preserving-capitol-hill-riot-livestreams-before-theyre-deleted>.

³⁷ <https://syrianarchive.org>.

³⁸ <https://occupyarchive.org>.

³⁹ See for example the writings of Michelle Caswell and the website of Archivists Against History Repeating Itself at <https://www.archivistsagainst.org>.

Ovenden's book concludes with a claim for the continued importance of archives and libraries, and I can only reiterate this. It is our duty to embrace change, welcome the digital world, accept that archives evolve and rejoice in the opportunities to welcome participation and greater representation. However, we continue, uniquely, to have the skills to appraise, process and preserve records, and to understand archival concepts such as context, evidence, authenticity and reliability. Archivists can grapple with legislative and ethical issues, understand the crucial role that archives play in society and seek to ensure that all citizens can access the benefits archives bring. In short, we know about the power of archives and it is up to us to make sure that others see this too.