CURATOR AS A JOURNALIST: DOCUMENTING CONTEMPORARY EPIDEMICS

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Conflicts of Interest
- None to declare
“The study of past events, particularly in human affairs:”
  · Oxford English Dictionary definition of ‘History’

“On one side plastic, Formica, gadgets, nothingness; on the other beauty and culture mummified in a museum.”

“Journalism is history in a hurry”
  · James Michener
How does what you are collecting fulfill your museum’s mission?

“It looks like it’s taxpayer-funded hoarding, as opposed to rigorous historical collecting.”

Tom Fitton, president of Judicial Watch, 2011

“The Museum collects from contemporary events because many of these materials are ephemeral and if not collected immediately, are lost to the historical record.”

Statement from Smithsonian Institution, 2011.

(http://americanhistory.si.edu/press/releases/statement-occupy-wall-street-protests-collecting)
If a curator would do an exhibit on the history of Ebola a century from now, what artifacts would they have wanted you to collect for them?

How do you ensure that they will have what they need?

Plasmoquin, Japan, World War II (M-660.00090)
“There is a certain big-city newspaper encased in bullet-proof glass that has a reputation for weakness in street reporting. One day I passed the windowed office of a columnist there and saw him inside, interviewing two men. It was symbolic of what was wrong with the paper; the reporters were bringing pieces of the world into the city room by appointment instead of venturing beyond their plastic hive to meet it on its own terms.”

“As a writer, you are an observer by occupation; that means you are always on the job. ...You must concentrate on what is going on around you as a matter of habit. -- and paying this kind of attention can be hard work. If you are a writer, however, you will warm to the game.”

“Don’t preconceive a story; if you go in expecting a certain slant, you may insist on it when it isn’t there. And always struggle with the certainty that you haven’t got the whole story.”

Pyridostigmine Bromide (Nerve agent pretreatment) M-660.10702
“Just as Houdini required a key to exotic obstacle, so too the writer -- a literary conjurer -- requires one for revealing events and occasions to his readers. It’s as simple to get a hold of as Houdini’s metal pick, but requires just as much imagination in the use. The key is legwork, and its adhering hook is the informed source.”


Animal trap used by CDC epidemiological survey team sent to Kikwit, Zaire (1995) M-762.10249
“Go to the source. See the your subject directly – at his home, office, health club or holding cell. It’s harder to hang up on you when you appear in person. If that isn’t possible, try the telephone. When that doesn’t work, then and only then, resort to the (Public Relations) route. In each case, identify yourself.”

Army Combat Helmet (ACH) with Blast Sensors, M-350.10297
Lessons Learned

- Get outside of the museum.
- Observe what is going on around you.
- Accept that you don’t know the whole story.
- Legwork, Legwork, Legwork.
- Go to the source.
Questions?

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