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ARNOVA-L and Challenging the ‘Cinderella Syndrome’¹

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Much of the history of the third sector recounted in this series involves large and important national nonprofit institutions and relatively large concentrations of people with common research and teaching interests providing international leadership in a small number of locations. There are, however, other, quite different, dimensions to our collective history that are equally worth telling. Particularly in the early days, many of us were lone individuals, without grant or foundation support, working alone on campuses where pretty much everyone else had other interests. In my own case, my interest in nonprofit organizations and voluntary action has been continuous since my work with the community action program in the 1960s, although I did not connect with the main and rapidly growing body of scholarly work in this area until the late 1980s. Until then, I was pretty much of a loner; and I know from conversations with colleagues that many others were in the same boat. Although I thought I could see clearly that something important was happening in the world, others around me were less certain. In 1980, for example, I published my first book. It was on financial management of *nonprofit* human services, but the publisher insisted on removing the word nonprofit from the title because a well-meaning anonymous reviewer convinced him that there was no such thing! We can better understand the role of loners like me in the early history of our field by looking more closely at the evolution of electronic communications – and the role of the ARNOVA-L discussion list – in that history.

The decade from 1985 to 1995 will always be remembered as a critically important time in the collective history of the sector. Most importantly for world historical understandings, it was during this time that the cold war ended (or, as some would have it, began a new chapter) and civil society became a seminally important international research and teaching concern. It was also during this time that the older, well-established, but smaller, and decentered research interests in volunteerism and voluntary action and social movements that were concentrated in the Association of Voluntary Action Scholars (AVAS) merged with the newer, larger and concentrated interests of nonprofit organization and the somewhat amorphous interests in philanthropy, foundations and fundraising and a range of additional related concerns. The occasion for these momentous developments was the founding in relatively short order of ARNOVA, ISTR, and a variety of other institutions including NACC. This includes the transformation of one and the founding of two of what are still the three most important journals in the field. It is a tribute to the vision and patience of those involved how relatively peaceful and harmonious it was

¹ An edited version of this recollection was published in the Spring, 2020 issue of the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC) newsletter as a contribution to the "Once Upon a Time" feature.

that all of these assorted bits and pieces came together into the edifice that today defines third sector studies.

It has not often been noted, but this period was also a time of remarkable – indeed revolutionary – change in the markets, industries and products that we tend to sum up with words like “computing.”

The tale I wish to tell here really began 49 years ago in February, 1971. I was a young doctoral student at the Heller School at Brandeis, watching a Sunday afternoon football game with my neighbor in suburban Boston. Patriots vs. Vikings? I don’t recall. He was a computer engineer at one of the largely top secret Route 128 beltway defense contractors. At halftime, we were swapping stories about work and he told me what little he could about his involvement with ARPA Net and how he was able to do something he called “email” with colleagues in places as far away as Los Alamos, Oak Ridge and Washington. As a former newspaper reporter and editor with an understanding of the technology of typesetting, ticker tape news services and the like, I was immediately aware that this was something potentially revolutionary, although I had no idea at the time how earth-shattering it would actually be. I have no recollection who won the game, or even if we watched the second half, but I spent a good bit of time over the next decade learning what I could (which wasn’t much) about email, ARPAnet, its successor DARPA net, and eventually their non-classified cousin BITNET. Much of this involved accessing mainframe computers with CRT terminals (Look it up!) By the early 1980s, I knew enough to begin to introduce my social work administration students to computing.

Finally, in the 1980’s, armed with my own new PC, my 1200 baud modem, a phone line and an AOL subscription (Remember “You’ve got mail!”?) I finally had access to something approaching real email. More importantly, I learned the documentation then becoming available about group lists (called Listserv after the technology). It’s still a really simple idea (and one anyone who has used Reply All is probably now familiar with): A computer file consisting of multiple email addresses which can distribute a single message to every address on the list.

Sometime after we moved from the University of Tennessee to West Virginia University in 1977, I began to serve as one of two social science representatives on the state-wide computing committee of faculty advisors for WVNET. Most of the committee were scientists and engineers. I tried hard to defend my by-then-firm conviction that email and communication-by-computer would someday be important but the others had a frequent good laugh at my expense as they gleefully reminded me that the machines were called computers for a reason! (They were for computing!)

The big break came rather unexpectedly at the London ARNOVA meeting in July, 1990. I had been a member of AVAS and ARNOVA for about five years by then, and I knew that at the conventional business meeting there would be a good bit of lamenting about the “Cinderella syndrome”; how the conference was nearly over and how delightful it was to be together with a large group of others with similar interests and how sad it was that we would not be in regular touch with one

another again until next year. (The telephone and ordinary mail and even AOL's mail were all point-to-point communications and were just not quite the same thing as being able to communicate with a relatively large group of colleagues.

I recall that someone said, "I wish there was a way we could keep in touch throughout the year." At that point I spoke up and said, "Actually, there is" and offered a brief introduction to my still thin knowledge of email and discussion lists, mostly to a large number of blank stares and a handful of nods. Two or three others spoke up in support of the idea of trying this and I volunteered to establish a list and offered to begin to collect email addresses. Before we left the room I had 10-12 BITNET addresses in hand and commitments from perhaps a dozen others to go back home and get an address and get it to me. Thus was born ARNOVA-L which got created a week or so later with those dozen or so addresses and officially launched early in 1991 with another 20 or so subscribers.

The growth in subscribers over the next decade looked about like this: 1991, 12; 1992 32; 1993 75; 1994 100; 1995 300; 1996 400; 1997 600; 1998 750; 1999 925. Sometime in the year 2000 we went over 1,000 subscribers. For 17 years, from 1991 until 2007, I operated the list and also managed the transitions in that time of both the list and the archives, first from the statewide WVNET to the WVU mainframe computer system, and then to its present home at Indiana University. More importantly, however, this simple (and by now antediluvian) 1970s computer Listserv® technology did what so many of us had hoped for: It both brought the various factions of interests together around one communications "watering hole" and it allowed all of us to keep in touch as a group on a year-round basis.

In the early years, I worked hard to stimulate genuine intellectual exchange, to discourage what was then called "flaming" by those now known as trolls, and to assure that the list remained open to all who were interested. There was some interest in the board at various times in restricting the list as a member benefit, but fortunately, the idea of using it as a recruiting tool for new members prevailed. Because it served our numerous purposes so well (far beyond anything any of us could have imagined in 1991!), ARNOVA-L proved to be both a pioneer among social science on-line communications and an exemplar for more than a dozen lists that have hived off since then. The idea of electronic communication with a large audience is now so well established that it is easy to overlook how radical it once was

Much of the reason for the success of ARNOVA-L was that some of the early adopters, notably the late Peter Dobkin Hall and Felice Perlmutter, Jon Van Til, Ram Cnaan, Dennis Young, Bob Herman and numerous other early adopters quickly recognized the methods and potentials of this medium and embraced them whole heartedly: Already within weeks of the founding this wasn't just one voice throwing out topics for discussion by others, but genuine, multi-point conversations. Early on, it must be said, most of the early adopters were male, but among the women early adopters including Felice, Margaret Harris, Nancy MacDuff, Susan

Chambre, Anita Plotinsky, and Susan Ostrander and a few others who were there from the earliest days.

I regret that I did not realize until a couple of years into the experiment that these conversations could also be captured in an online archive. All of the earliest emails have been lost, but since that time every conversation on the list became part of the archive which we were able to successfully transfer to Indiana U. when the list was moved.

Still A Computer Hobbyist

I began the adventure with ARNOVA-L essentially as a computer hobbyist and early adopter and have continued to devote a portion of my time each month to a variety of what some might consider “blood-letting” at the “bleeding edges” of technology (although in reality, I get further and further from the real leading edges of technology every day.) This has involved a large list of experimental projects including the first web site design for ARNOVA (which was, fortunately, quickly taken in hand by Anita Plotinsky and turned into the useful tool it is today.) It also includes lots and lots of dead ends like a modular taxonomy for metadata (all of which can be categorized as either identifiers, descriptors or locators). Or various experiments with CMS systems.

One effort I do think is worth current attention: I was among the first subscribers from our field to academia.edu, researchgate.com and the then current version of BEP (Berkeley Electronic Press). My current project over the last two years has been to edit and upload I began saving my conference papers and pre-prints of all of my journal articles and books early in my career and since the 1990s I have everything online, although a few pieces have been lost due to file corruption, disk failures and incompatible version updates. BEP now markets software and an integrated system to make manuscript archives available to the world. When adopted by university libraries these can be made available to the world free.

It would be a good thing for the field if others did the same and established permanent online records of their life’s work. Perhaps the greatest challenge in this area will be to reconstruct the archives of those who grew inactive or died without making their work available for others in this way: The papers and manuscripts of Felice, Peter, Mark, Gabriel Rudney, Ralph Kramer and numerous other pioneers, as well as all those able to look after their own work, should be available for the world to explore as our field continues to grow and expand. This poses an interesting challenge for the future.