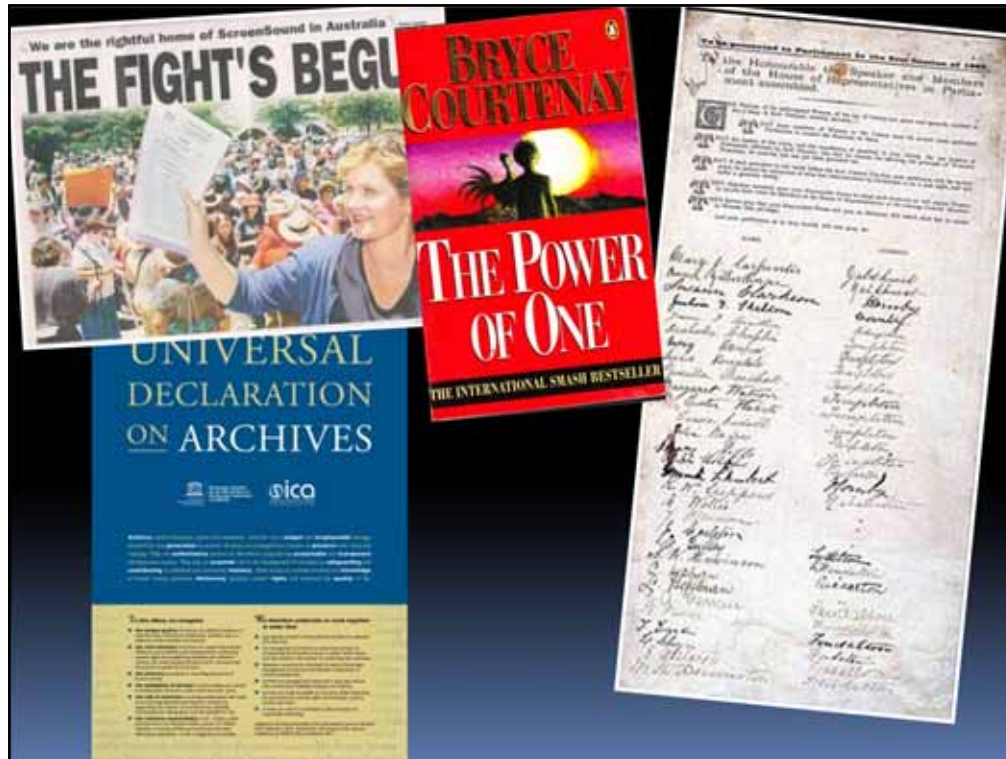


Ray Edmondson

Advocacy and the power of one

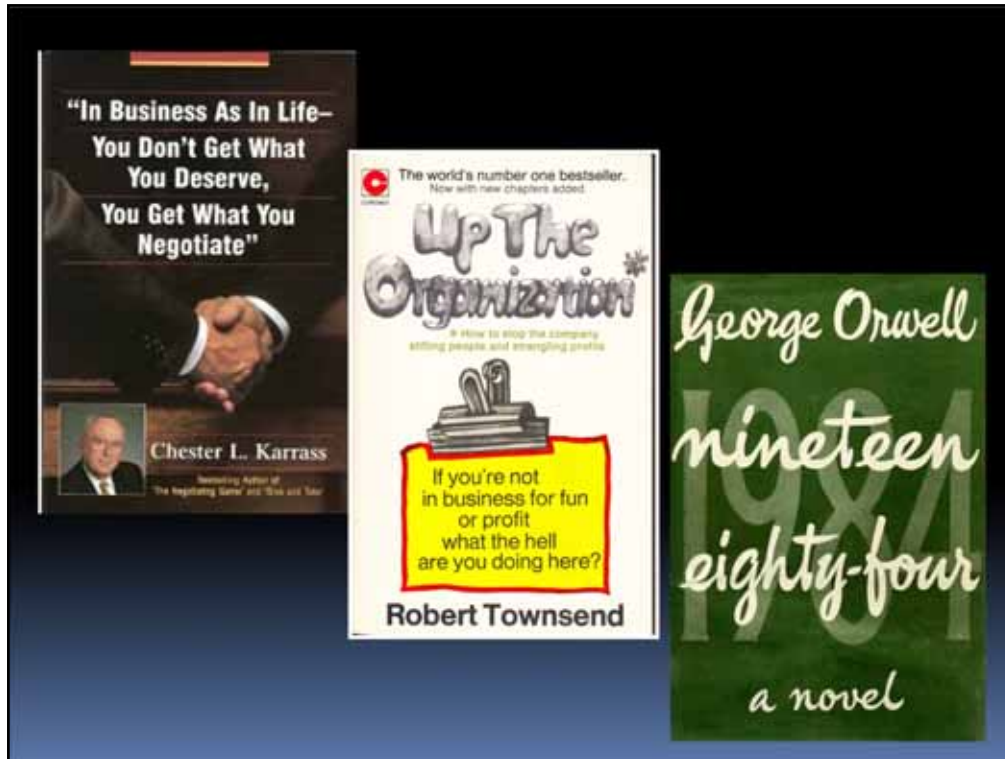
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The power of one is a best selling novel. It's also a statement of what an individual can do, alone or in concert with others.

Fights, declarations, petitions are obvious methods of advocacy. In 1893, New Zealand's women banded together and petitioned parliament. New Zealand became the first country to give women the vote.

By our standard it seems odd and unfair that they had to mobilise to get what they deserved. But they did, and in time the rest of the world followed.



Do archives get what they deserve? The value of archiving may be obvious to us: so it should be supported, by legislators and the community at large.

But as Chester Karrass reminds us, real life doesn't work that way. Archiving is an activity which can always be put off until tomorrow. The squeaky wheel gets the grease. We need to constantly negotiate for our place in the sun. And it isn't easy. Action begets reaction. Let me quote Robert Townsend, former boss of Avis Rent a car:

If you discovered how to eliminate air pollution for \$1.50 per state, the worst way to accomplish it would be to announce your discovery. You'd be amazed at how many people would oppose your scheme. The best way, if you could stay alive and out of jail, would be to just start eliminating it, state by state.

Who would want to oppose or control archives? Archives are powerful. There are always forces in society that want to bury or rewrite the past, or who don't see the point of spending money on keeping old stuff. As George Orwell says in "1984" – "who controls the past controls the future, and who controls the present controls the past".



You will recognise two of these. Aung San Suu Kyi has come to symbolise the Burmese peoples' aspirations for democracy. The daughter of a famous Burmese patriot who had been assassinated, she left an academic life in the West to become politically active in the country of her birth. I doubt she could have anticipated what the personal cost would be.

In 1955 Rosa Parks defied racial segregation laws in Alabama by refusing to give up her seat on the bus to a white passenger. She became a symbol of the American civil rights movement.

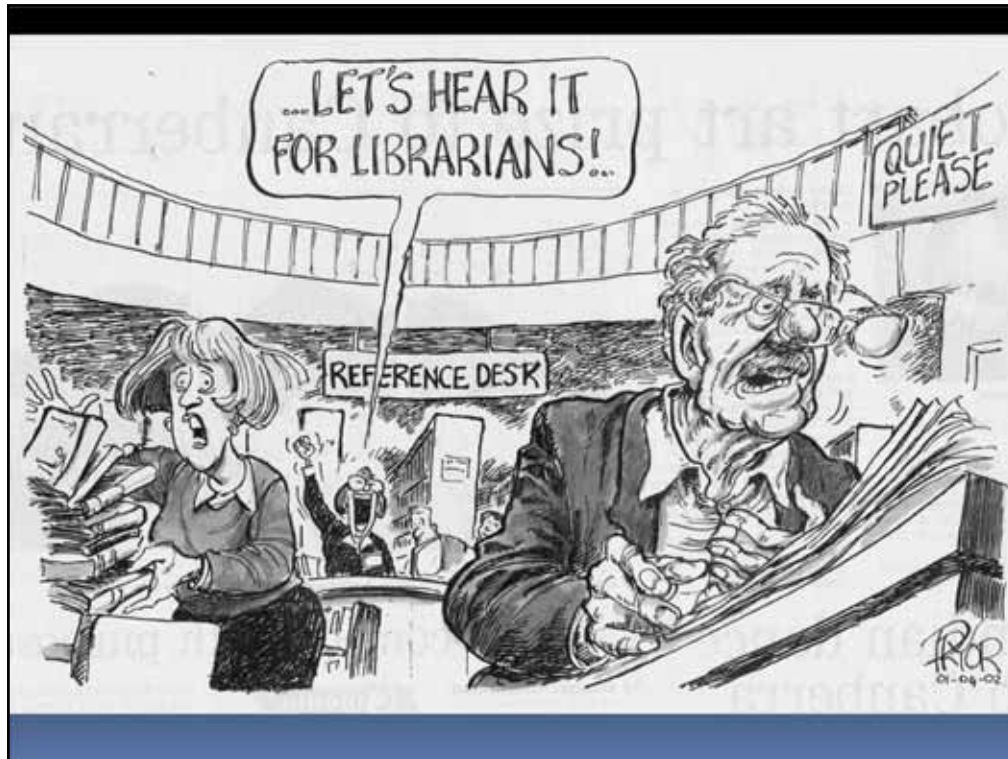
You may not recognise the third one. Bernie Banton died in 2007 from asbestosis and mesothelioma. His crusade as a sick man forced one of Australia's corporate giants, James Hardie Ltd, to live up to its responsibility and provide for former employees afflicted by this disease.

The common thread? All three were ordinary people who responded to unexpected circumstances. We can be faced with unexpected circumstances in our profession and may need to make personal decisions on how we respond.



Whether or not any of us are remembered by history, we entered our profession with altruistic motivations – for archiving is a vocation, not just a job. Do we have our dreams – for the future of our institutions, our profession, the moving image heritage? What do we hope for? An occasional improvement here? Gratitude for small mercies? Or do we see a bigger picture, a future which we are convinced is normative and therefore the only acceptable minimum?

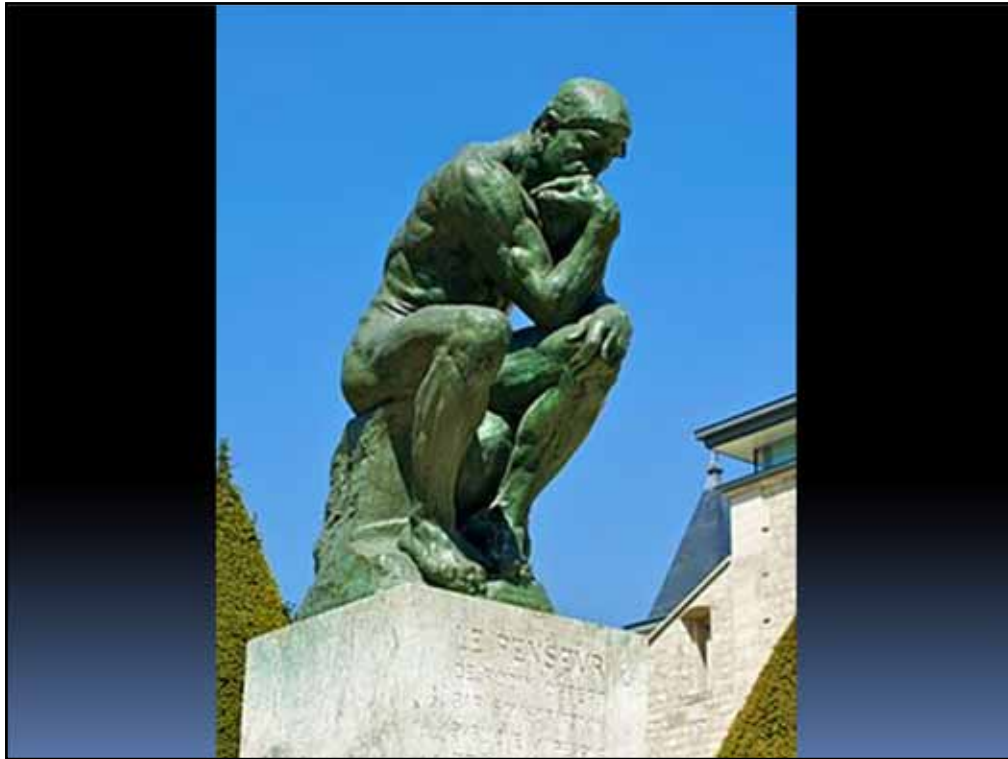
Our profession and our institutions didn't just happen. They evolved. They were fought for. And we're not there yet. To coin a phrase: eternal vigilance is the price of preservation, and the most fundamental aspect of preservation is actually the stability, continuity and good governance of our archival institutions.



Despite the best advocacy efforts of our professional associations, we have an image problem. The media stereotype of the timid, bespectacled librarian is a cliché. Unfortunately, research confirms it has some validity. Studies using personality-type inventories like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator give a more nuanced picture than the stereotype, but too close to it for comfort.

We differ from the general population. We in the memory professions are typed as “guardians”: dependable, process-driven, methodical, reliable back-room people, intuitive and introverted. We’re among the best educated but the lowest paid. We fail to obtain the resources and status needed for our work, because the studies suggest we are poor advocates for our own cause. We rate three times lower on the ‘advocacy’ scale than the general population. We are not political animals and we shy away from confrontation.

Does that mean we *can’t* be good advocates in our own situation? No, it’s just not our preference. We’d prefer others do that sort of thing for us.



Our personality preferences incline us to look inward to our structures rather than outward to our constituency. So we don't easily build relationships with people like journalists or politicians.

The skills of advocacy can be learned. It's basically making the effort to reach out to others. Meeting with politicians, fronting the media, or public speaking might not be our preference. But we are all – and I mean all – capable of them. We might feel a poor match for professional lobbyists and public relations experts, but if I were a politician or journalist I would rather listen to an archivist who believes passionately in her work, than to a professional lobbyist with no such commitment or depth.

We need to be ethical in all we do, but we could find ourselves in situations for which no code of ethics has a pat answer. To whom do we have obligations? Our employer? Our peer group? Our stakeholders? Or to the heritage we care for and our profession at large? These obligations may not all harmonise. As professionals we have to take responsibility for our own actions. Blind loyalty to a system does not absolve us from questioning its fundamental assumptions, nor acquiescing in instructions which breach a principle or a convention.



I turn now to some sequential case studies in which I was involved. They relate to the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. (NFSA)

First, The Last Film Search, a corporately sponsored project launched in 1981 to trawl the backblocks of Australia for nitrate film, which we all then believed was on the verge of disintegration. What is now the NFSA was then part of the National Library of Australia. That's me in the top picture in the days when I had hair and a brown beard.

The project was a kind of national treasure hunt – and it was successful. Only in retrospect did we realise it was really an advocacy project.

After the Search started, I was in a taxi in Sydney while the driver spontaneously enthused about the “great film search”. That made me realise the project had captured the national imagination. By intuition we had come up with a timely strategy, an effective name and slogan, and access to free publicity, since film finds were newsworthy. But we also discovered the Search had dramatically raised public and political awareness about the then National Film Archive and its needs, and the fact that so much of our film heritage was lost. This would prove crucial to future events.



But I knew a watershed moment had arrived. A broad constituency of stakeholders across the film, TV and radio industries and academia had for years become increasingly concerned. What was my proper place in the unfolding events? How would I deal with the ethical issues it raised?

This gives you some idea of the press controversy in late 1983.

As Shakespeare says, "there is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood leads on to victory." It was the historic moment, and the Government proceeded to create the National Film and Sound Archive as a separate institution in May 1984.



The third case study brings us to the middle of 2003, when for reasons that are still secret, the NFSA – then temporarily known as ScreenSound Australia - was “integrated” with a much smaller and dissimilar body, the Australian Film Commission. The government offered no rationale for this but claimed there would be “synergies.” It was a hostile takeover. The NFSA itself was never consulted; legislation was fast tracked; there was no opportunity for public consultation or debate. Profuse Ministerial promises persuaded stakeholders to give the move the benefit of the doubt. But this goodwill was shattered when the Commission released its plans: dismissal of all senior management, effective dismantlement of the institution, and absorption into the Commission.

Public outrage, led by the media and local politicians, was immediate. Many staff (except those personally threatened) joined the protests, with union support.



Within a week, the Commission and the Minister had to back down on key parts of their plan. Carefully orchestrated stakeholder consultations failed to paper over the anger. The Commission was deluged with public submissions. They were never responded to and maybe never even read. Contrary to the Minister's assurances, the Commission ploughed on in classic style. It merged the NFSA's budget, website and IT systems, removed its logo, rebadged Archive activities as its own, homogenised email addresses, commandeered public relations, and generally suppressed the Archive's identity.

Reasoned discussion with a body which publicly defamed its critics proved impossible. The Commission silenced financially dependent industry associations. That left only individuals and groups who were not afraid of the Commission, nor beholden to it. These included the Friends of the NFSA, the Australian Society of Archivists, and the historians' association. The war of attrition would last for four years.



For simplicity I'll focus on one advocacy group. Archive Forum was an informal collective of about 15 prominent people who were credible commentators on the NFSA and the Film Commission's stewardship of it. Almost from the beginning the Commission treated it as an adversary. By briefing politicians, producing letters, reports, media releases and a petition signed by 250 prominent people, the Forum was able to constantly call the Commission to account. It joined with other stakeholder groups towards a single objective: independent statutory status and an Act of Parliament for the NFSA.



Crucially, the advocacy groups documented their joint position in a reasoned, rigorous and dispassionate way. This widely distributed statement in 2006 demonstrated how the merger had failed, why it could never work and why there was only one solution: statutory autonomy for the NFSA. It offered that solution rather than complaining about the problem. It emphasised the great danger of a permanent body, like an archive, being under an inherently temporary body like the Film Commission.

And so it happened. The passage of the NFSA Act in 2008, with the support of all political parties, followed a change of government. The Australian Film Commission itself vanished into a merger with other bodies. The Forum's chair, former senator Chris Puplick, summarised it like this:

“This was an exercise in old fashioned politics. A determined group of well informed and dedicated individuals embarked on a campaign to reverse a significant government policy in the arts. By the traditional methods of lobbying the opposition, seeking support within the government's own ranks, mobilising external support groups and interests, using the parliamentary meetings such as estimates committees to raise questions and concerns, and planting or encouraging favourable media reporting, this complete reversal of policy was achieved”

12 point guerrilla guide

- Be sure you're right
- Your objective is normative
- Put yourself in your opponent's shoes
- Be realistic
- Believe in yourself

This leads to what I call a twelve point guerrilla guide for advocates. Here it is:

1 Be clear about your objective, its practicality and its necessity. **Be sure you are right.** Your objective must be principled, held with conviction, be in the public interest, and be able to withstand intellectual scrutiny.

2 Accordingly, your objective represents the **normative** situation. Present circumstances, no matter how apparently permanent, are actually **temporary**. Act accordingly. Don't acknowledge the permanency of an unsatisfactory temporary situation, either to others or **especially** to yourself. This is crucial to your own mindset.

3 Understand your opponents and their motives. Give praise where it is due: avoid confrontation if you can. Don't react emotionally – stay calm and collected. Call them to account against principles – not opinions. Don't paint them into a corner: provide an exit route. Focus on principles, not personalities. You are pursuing an objective, not scoring points.

4 Be realistic. Advocacy can be stressful. It can impact others – your family, your friends, your associates. Your opponents may try to discredit you, misrepresent your arguments, question your motives or spread malicious rumours. If the conflict becomes bitter, some relationships may never recover.

5 Believe in yourself and your own capacities. Don't make excuses. You may not feel you are the best or cleverest proponent of your cause. But you are on the spot. Your conviction will communicate more than the most elegant prose or interview performance.

12 point guerrilla guide

- Build friendships
- Persist
- Build alliances
- Set the agenda
- Offer a solution, not a problem
- Keep complete records

6 Build trustful friendships over time with people who share your convictions and can support you intellectually and emotionally. Have one or two confidants you can share with. Learn who you can trust in the media and, if appropriate, among politicians across the spectrum.

7 Persist. Persist. Delay and obfuscation are great bureaucratic weapons. Your opponents may try to exhaust you, and make you doubt that it's worth the trouble. To quote Robert Townsend, "it's a poor bureaucrat who can't stall a good idea until even its proponent is relieved to see it dead and buried."

8 United we stand. Build alliances. Several groups seeking the same objective is a stronger statement than a single group (no matter how large). But disunity is death. If the groups can't align around a common objective or strategy, they won't achieve much.

9 Set the agenda. Don't wait for opportunities – make them. Write an article, talk to the media, raise issues that your opponents won't. Argue for your objective, from first principles if necessary, in all circumstances. Don't respond to taunts in kind. Use due process wherever possible.

10 Offer a solution, not a problem. Propose practical ways of reaching your objective with, if possible, a win-win result. What is negotiable in your position? Be approachable and strategic.

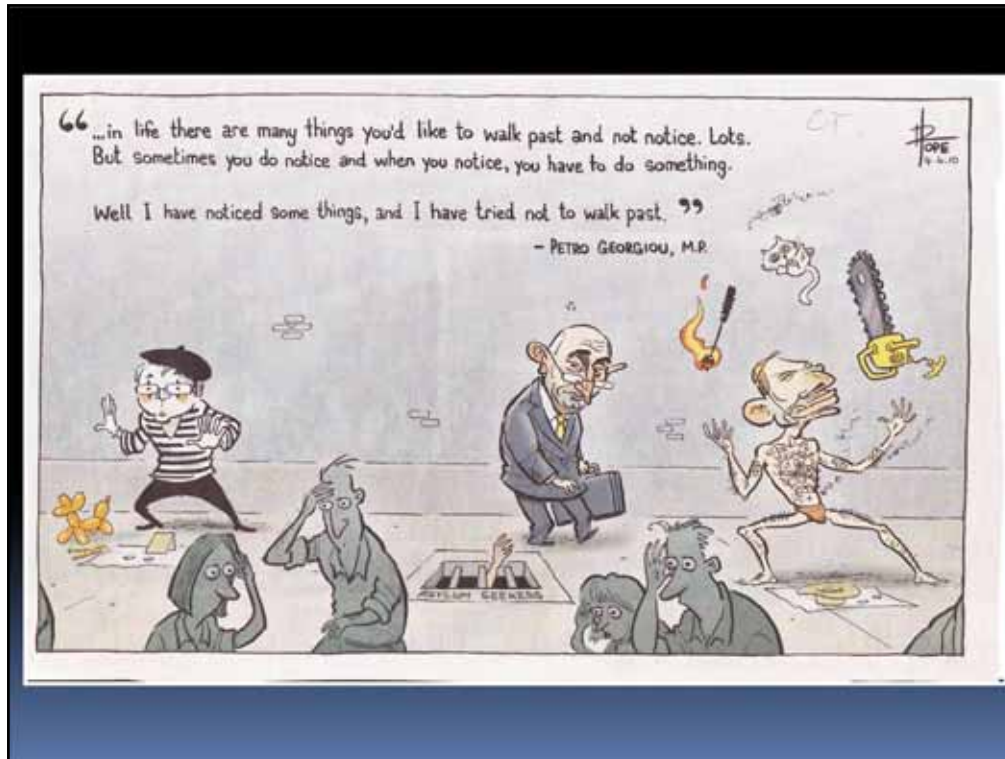
11 Keep complete records: documents, media clippings and correspondence. Make a record of meetings, conversations, promises and agreements. Keep extra copies of key documents in more than one location. You will always know where you have been and what you have said.

And finally, there's one more important principle....



It doesn't matter who gets the credit

When the objective is achieved, it doesn't matter who gets the credit. We are all human. We want to be recognised. But sometimes the only way to reach your objective may be to let someone else get the glory. It's always been that way, and it's why you should read history with a sceptical eye!



Advocacy is serious business. It's tempting to focus on the difficulties and think someone else could do the job better than you could. You might be right, but that's not the point.

Focus on the possibilities. No one else is where you are, in your circumstances, with your knowledge and opportunities. You know, you might just win if you tackle a seemingly impossible task. It comes back to personal choice, to the power of one, to looking back on an achievement or even just a good try, and to saying to yourself "I did that."

The power of one is not about acting alone, but about doing what you can with what falls to you to do.

Without advocacy and risk, things do not advance. And even if you're unsuccessful, your actions will be observed by others and may inspire them. We advance when people notice and don't walk past. How do we respond to Petro Georgiou's challenge?

"Somebody has to do it, so it might as well be me"

Bryce Courtenay

Thank you