

A Space Journalist's Dilemma: Archiving the Past for the Future

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Since the early 1950's I have been collecting materials related to the early beginnings of the "Space Age" – the classic U.S. versus the then Soviet Union in opening up the space frontier.

Starting with ripped out articles from magazines to clippings from local newspapers, this collection has grown over the decades to include letters from early space pioneers, interviews, books, NASA publications, as well as trade show handouts and a myriad of space collectibles.

At present, much of the older material is stored in boxes and boxes and boxes within storage sheds. More recent – in the last few decades, since the 1970s – this collection has matured to include recordings and other documents related to my own career as a "space journalist," writing for numbers of publications, including Aviation Week & Space Technology, AIAA's Aerospace America, New Scientist, and newspapers such as the Financial Times, Space News, and the Washington Post.

With the advent of the Internet, my space journalism career also involved the early development and writing for Space.com – one of the premier on-line avenues for space reporting. I continue to write for Space.com on a fairly regular basis.

Much of my professional writing career was augmented by nearly 30 years of living in and around Washington, D.C. Access to NASA, its executives, scientists and other researchers (pre-911) was simple, requiring press credentials. Similarly, coverage of congressional hearings related to space was extensively pursued over those three decades.

A highlight of my Washington, D.C.-based career was involvement as a staff person for the National Commission on Space, a pioneering look at the next 100 years of space exploration.

Now nearing age 72, and still carrying out reporting/writing duties – including books for National Geographic on space exploration topics – my concern is in preserving what I feel is important documentation. However, that documentation is now overwhelming and deserves near-term and enhanced organization to assure its value.

Just what steps are needed/required to preserve and protect this unique collection is of utmost urgency. Furthermore, my personal guess is that other reporters at my age, or even younger, have similar issues. In short, at stake is how best to classify and place value on more than a half-century of collecting space documents and memorabilia?

There is a financial toll that comes with attempting, no matter how modest, to preserve and protect collected space documentation. If indeed, as I believe is the case that this collection is of value, just where should it go – and in what acceptable state should it be?

Over the years of reporting on space exploration activities, I sense among senior space engineers and scientists I have encountered, there is growing concern about the wellbeing and proper disposal of heritage collections. What is a pathway for protection and archiving of their respective properties? Sadly, if such a pathway is not devised, perhaps a wealth of unique, historical materials will surely be trash-bin bound.

While busy in maintaining my writing/reporting, I have not kept up with current archiving technologies and what others in this arena have found to be the best avenues available.

No doubt, the quandary I face is not unique – but I'm on the lookout for approaches to save the past for the future.