

Navigating the Space-Time Continuum

Presidential Address, Association for
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Thank you. It's been an honor to serve as your president. I'd like to thank the Association for Documentary Editing members, as well as committee members and council members, that I've had the pleasure to work with, not only as president, but over the course of the past twenty-five years I've been a member. I truly appreciate your service in our all-volunteer organization. I know and understand how busy we are with our real jobs, and your commitment to the Association for Documentary Editing is what keeps it alive.

I want to begin by acknowledging a couple of people. These are people without whom I probably wouldn't be standing here as a documentary editor, or as a historian, or as your president. First is John Y. Simon. I was an undergraduate at Southern Illinois University Carbondale unsure of my career path when I took history classes simply because I enjoyed them. John Simon's classes led me to a path of choosing history as a career. When I began graduate school, I spoke to Simon and told him I wanted to be a Lincoln scholar. He said—and I'm not going to do the John Simon voice, but for those of you who know him, you can all just imagine it—"I'm going to give you some strange advice. You should leave SIU and transfer to Sangamon State University in Springfield and get involved with this new documentary editing project called the Lincoln Legal Papers." I took his advice.

Next is Cullom Davis who as director of the Lincoln Legal Papers gave me an internship as I worked on my master’s degree at Sangamon State, then shepherded me in my rise gradually up the ranks in the project. Cullom’s support and encouragement certainly helped me to gain confidence as a documentary editor as he entrusted me to write the briefs for more than half the 5,600 cases and nonlitigation activities in Lincoln’s law practice.¹ Last is Daniel Stowell who as director of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln encouraged academic scholarship.² He allowed his staff to present scholarly papers and articles, following the philosophy of John Kaminsky—that we are all experts of our chosen editing subjects, and withholding the knowledge we have is a disservice to the public at large. Daniel not only accepted that premise but pushed the staff to accept it as well. Without Daniel’s guidance, I probably would not have been able to make the leap from associate director of the Lincoln Papers to leading my own historical agency for the Illinois Supreme Court.³

After that brief look in my personal past, I wish to go further back in time. Ever since I was a child, I have always been fascinated by science fiction. I grew up reading the books of Ray Bradbury, Arthur C. Clarke, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Isaac Asimov. The books were my gateway drug into movies and television shows like *Star Wars*, *Dr. Who*, and *Star Trek*. Any time you have a *Star Trek* episode that features Abraham Lincoln and Captain Kirk vs. Genghis Khan and a Klingon, you just can’t go wrong.⁴ Even today, I find myself completely engrossed in *The Avengers*, *X-Men*, and other really well-done sci-fi movies. The latest trend is presenting a dystopian future with such recent examples as *The Hunger Games* and any movie featuring a zombie apocalypse.⁵ My three daughters have inherited my sci-fi gene even though they roll their eyes when they can’t open a jar and I use my Hulk voice while opening it and calling them “puny humans.” I can do the Hulk—I can’t do John Simon.

More specifically into the sci-fi genre, I particularly enjoy time-travel stories. The idea of being able to travel in time forward or backward has always been a dream of mine. I loved reading books such as H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* and Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* that prominently feature time travel but also provide social commentary.⁶ And movies such as *The Terminator* and *Back to the Future* not only enthralled me but provided larger lessons as well.⁷ I will

even admit that I enjoy the time-travel love story whether it's Jane Seymour and Christopher Reeve on Mackinac Island or Sandra Bullock and Keanu Reeves at a lake house.⁸ When I give presentations to groups about Abraham Lincoln the lawyer, one question I frequently get is whether I'm a lawyer. I answer no, but then I add that since I've read the same books that Lincoln did when he was a lawyer, I could probably practice law in the 1840s and 1850s. I further add that if I ever build a time machine, I know I can go to antebellum Illinois to practice law and probably make a decent living. I say this as a joke, of course, but there's a kernel of hope.

Many physicists say that there is no possibility of time travel backward, but according to Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, if I approach the speed of light, I can actually travel forward in time—as I move faster, the slower my time will pass relative to a person remaining on the Earth. So, after my very, very fast trip, the person on Earth has experienced months or even years while I simultaneously experienced only a few hours or even minutes.⁹ If you saw the movie *Interstellar*, starring Matthew McConaughey, you understand this concept.¹⁰

Richard Feynman built on Einstein's work with quantum mechanics, developing his "sum over histories" theory in which every possible path from point A to point B is considered.¹¹ The probability of an event is determined by summing together all the possible histories of that event. Time is described as a direction in space—matter moves forward in time; antimatter moves backward in time. But Feynman did not believe that time travel backward was possible using this model by simply hitching a ride on antimatter.

Then we have Stephen Hawking, who popularized physics in his book *A Brief History of Time*.¹² Hawking attempted to merge Einstein's theory of relativity with Feynman's quantum theory into a grand unified theory, or a theory of everything.¹³ He has since changed his mind on the existence of a theory of everything and is now a firm believer in the many-worlds theory, that all possible alternate histories and futures are real, each representing an actual world or an actual universe. This would imply that there is a world in existence in which John Wilkes Booth had NOT assassinated Abraham Lincoln, for example.¹⁴ This is almost mind-blowing, as the possible number of worlds would have to be infinite!¹⁵

Einstein, Feynman, and Hawking provide at least a glimmer of hope for us poor sci-fi addicts who wonder about the possibility of traveling in time. But I have a secret that the physicists don't know. So, I hate to break it to them, but I actually can travel through time. I don't have to have a time machine, or travel through wormholes, or discover bridges to alternate histories or futures, or disrupt the space-time continuum. My avenue of time travel is pretty simple: the document.

In a general sense, not only documents allow time travel, but objects as well. Dinosaur bones, ice cores, and geological features all provide an avenue into a past period of time. Even looking at the stars, galaxies, and nebula in the sky, we are looking into the past. Take, for example, light, from our own sun traveling at 186,000 miles per second, takes eight minutes to reach the Earth, so the sun we see when looking up in the sky is what the sun looked like eight minutes ago. We see the past simply by looking up.

But for our purposes, the document is the secret to time travel, whether it be a letter, a diary, or a text. This is done in two distinct ways: first, documents themselves travel in time, and second, documentary editors serve as time-travel guides. Documents are the center of our universe as editors, and without documents, we have no projects, no funding, no staff, no Society for Textual Scholarship, and no Association for Documentary Editing.

How do documents travel through time? It's simple. A drawing by Thomas Edison travels in time from his hands to Paul Israel's eyes; a letter by Margaret Sanger travels from her typewriter to Esther Katz's eyes.¹⁶

Documents allow us to see and to learn about life in different eras—at least as far back as the written record exists. With the documentary record, we can pass important information down to succeeding generations. This is important. Human ancestors have been on Earth, according to anthropologists, for about six million years. Only in the last 200,000 years have modern forms of humans appeared. And civilization as we know it has only been in existence for the last 6,000 or so years. Not coincidentally, writing also made its first appearance 6,000 years ago.¹⁷ By transferring a knowledge base from generation to generation, newer generations can build upon the work of previous ones, allowing mankind to advance agriculturally, socially, economically, and technologically.¹⁸ Isaac Newton best summarized this concept when he wrote in a letter that he had “seen further

by standing on the shoulders of giants.”¹⁹ With this documentary record, we can see into the past as easily as we can look up in the sky.

There is a great deal of interest today in the documents of our collective past. Nearly one million people view the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights at the National Archives annually.²⁰ Why do people want to stand in line, possibly for hours, to see something they can easily pull up on the Internet? People want to have a real, tangible connection with these particular documents that gave us our country and our freedoms. Seeing letters written by George Washington, for example, give people a real experience with him.

I’ve noticed too how students react to documents. When I speak to elementary and middle school classes, I like to bring in documents—not real ones, just photocopies—and I see how enthralled the students are in looking at them. I will have the students transcribe the document and give me ideas what this document might be about. In addition to the content, I like to talk about the paper, the ink, the handwriting, the fold marks, all of which give clues as to how the document was created and the context in which it was created. Teachers are frequently interested in using documents as teaching tools, and documentary editors are best able to provide them.

These travel-through-time experiences with documents such as the Declaration of Independence or George Washington’s letters, are not quantifiable. In the world of grant-writing and state and federal budgets, we have to quantify everything—how many individuals did you serve last year; how many individuals do you expect to serve this year? Eric Foner recently commented that the “notion that the public good can be measured in something other than economic terms has pretty much been abandoned.”²¹ Of course, I cannot testify before my state legislature’s appropriation committee that I use documents to travel through time, so I end up telling them the numbers they want—how many students I spoke to. What’s frustrating is that I can’t quantify the look on a fourth grader’s face when she figured out how to read a nineteenth-century letter. I received this note: “Mr. Lupton, I didn’t know Lincoln wrote in cursive.” I suppose I can submit this note and other notes I receive as evidence at my appropriation hearing: “Mr. Lupton, your job is so cool”; “Mr. Lupton, your job sounds super interesting”; and lastly, my favorite, “Mr. Lupton, I want to be a historian like you.”²² These are real notes.

And documents have a power over people that isn't quantifiable. I truly felt like I had taken these students to a different time, a different era, and helped them understand the context of nineteenth-century Illinois.

And this leads to my second method of time travel, the documentary editor as guide—or for you *Dr. Who* fans, the time lord. The principal goal of the documentary editor is to make documents accessible by providing authoritative transcriptions and contextualization. Or more simply put, we want people to read documents, and we want people to understand what these documents mean. Going further, I want people to be transported in time to meet people and understand society in different eras.

While outreach to schools and justifying ourselves to funding sources are a part of our task, the root of documentary editing is in the added value we give to the documents. Michael Stevens once noted that “a document without explanation is useless.”²³ As documentary editors, we have an obligation to contextualize these documents to readers who are not as experienced in time travel as we are. Editions then become large-scale time machines. Our immersion in these documents gives us editors an insight that few people have. As a result, we can bridge seemingly unconnected facts into a narrative that helps to explain a certain event or a certain decision. And because of our knowledge of a particular period of time, documentary editors can better understand the larger context of those facts, events, and decisions. We are, in fact, reliving those moments along with our chosen subject.

Rich Leffler noted this tangible connection we have with our subjects: “[A]s editors, we become intimately involved with our subject.”²⁴ Other editors have commented that they can “eavesdrop” on written conversations and that we editors live “simultaneously in two different worlds” of time.²⁵ We editors have a rare job that guides people to different moments in time. When I read the Lewis and Clark journals, for example, I feel as though I'm transported back to 1804 looking at the same trees and flowers that they did along the Missouri River. Their writing is a time capsule that I can open whenever I want and take the same journey as they did. But the contextualization that accompanies it helps me to understand better what Lewis and Clark themselves experienced and understand better that period of time.

In that sense, we are time-travel guides—we can watch Abraham Lincoln defend a slaveowner in an 1847 legal case, and we can try to explain why Lincoln, the antislavery advocate, might have taken this case. We can go back to the Gettysburg Address and note the changes among the five different texts and explain why Lincoln wrote all five.²⁶

Our editions have been reaching wider audiences, making time travel available to the masses. In the past dozen or so years, accomplished authors who use our editions have written wonderful biographies and books.²⁷ We have given students and authors the ability to travel through time to see not only their subject but also a range of people in different places. For example, one who studies a particular event in the presidency of John Adams can travel to the national capital to see what Adams was writing. But to add more to this travel, you can go and see the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Timothy Pickering, and John Marshall and “eavesdrop” on their conversations. Our editions serve as time machines, and the editor serves as the time-travel guide.

Because we are guides, we cannot change what happened in the past. And my mind is still blown away by Hawking’s many-worlds theory, which would give us the opportunity to bridge these worlds to see what life would be like if history took a different course. In his short story “A Sound of Thunder,” Ray Bradbury explained the butterfly effect. In traveling to the dinosaur age, one of the characters stepped on and killed a butterfly, and upon his return to the present, the English language was different, spelling was different, and a fascist Hitleresque candidate had been elected president.²⁸ The butterfly effect describes that something as insignificant as killing a butterfly in the past can result in subtle or even drastic changes in the present. So, even though Stephen Hawking may believe there is a world in which John Wilkes Booth did not succeed in killing Lincoln, we still don’t have the technology to get to that world and see the changes the butterfly effect made in today’s alternate present. Historians typically don’t like to answer “what if” questions, but the butterfly effect, if true, would be a counterfactual historian’s dream come true.

I recently watched the 1902 movie short *A Trip to the Moon*.²⁹ This is the famous movie by Georges Melies with the scene of the rocket landing in the man-in-the-moon’s eye. In 1902 we were still a year away from the Wright Brothers’ first flight. Who would have thought that a mere sixty-seven years later, humans

actually would walk on the moon? The sci-fi of the past is the technology of the present. What will the sci-fi of the present give us for the future?

According to Einstein’s theory of relativity, we can only travel to the future—according to Lupton’s theory of documentary editing, we can only travel into the past. But I do wonder what the future of the documentary editing profession will look like. How will future editors guide their generation back in time to our day? Today we have email, texts, Twitter, Facebook, and other forms of social media—how will this content be explained by editors of the future? I sincerely hope that our culture won’t be stereotyped as the Age of Kardashian. Or will it be the age of TMI—too much information—as people frequently post a picture to Facebook of that fettucine alfredo or other meals they’ve had that day. Or they post boring details about their lives—what flavor of gum they picked up in the checkout line at the grocery store, for example. We don’t care, and we may not care about the blog by the first-time mother who documents every tedious fact and milestone with her baby. Truth be told, these seemingly uninteresting tidbits come together to form a picture of life in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—much the same as mundane lawsuits over five-dollar debts in the 1840s give us a great window into the antebellum economy. I imagine editors of the future will love that blog by the first-time mother as an excellent diary of child-rearing in the early twenty-first century.

For the future editor, we also have oral histories, which have been extremely important in the past to Native American cultures. With the lack of letter writing today, there is a growing trend for universities, historical societies, and libraries to have oral history programs to capture the thoughts and words of politicians, military veterans, business leaders, and community leaders, prominent or not. These oral histories are wonderful memoir pieces for the subject and his or her immediate family. That’s how it’s sold, but its true value will come in the future, when editors twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred years from now will be able to guide historians and researchers to travel back in time and read these oral histories to get into the minds of people living today and explain today’s life to those people in the future who did not experience it firsthand.³⁰

I appreciate your patience with my odd connection between science-fiction time travel and documentary editing, so let me close with one more trip back to my college years. When I was an undergraduate, I considered majoring in astrophysics

because of my childhood interest in space exploration and time travel, and even today, I find myself reading articles on planetary probes, string theory vs. quantum loop gravity, multiverses, and the possibility of numerous dimensions. Looking back—and to use another time-travel metaphor, hindsight is 20/20—I made the right choice in becoming a documentary editor. I don't have to prove or disprove the existence of wormholes or other means of time travel. By immersing myself in documents, I can transport myself back in time to whatever period I choose and guide others as to what the document is and what it means whether I'm observing great historical events or mundane day-to-day life. Our own personal space-time continuum is found within the documentary world. Physicists have nothing on us!

Thank you.

Notes

1. Martha L. Benner, Cullom Davis, eds., *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*, DVD edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Martha L. Benner and Cullom Davis, eds., *The Law Practice of Abraham Lincoln: Complete Documentary Edition*, 2nd ed. (Springfield: Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, 2009), <http://www.lawpracticeofabrahamlincoln.org>.
2. For example, see Daniel W. Stowell, ed., *In Tender Consideration: Women, Families, and the Law in Abraham Lincoln's Illinois* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), in which editors of the *Papers of Abraham Lincoln* contributed chapters on various legal topics that were prominent in antebellum Illinois.
3. Illinois Supreme Court Historic Preservation Commission, <http://illinoiscourthistory.org/>.
4. "The Savage Curtain," *Star Trek*, season 3, episode 22, original air date March 7, 1969.
5. The individual movies are too numerous to cite, but the *X-Men* franchise is produced by Twentieth Century Fox Studios and has run from 2000 to the present, and the *Avengers* franchise is produced by Marvel Studios and has run from 2008 to the present. The *Hunger Games* franchise is produced by Lionsgate Studios and has run from 2012 to 2015.

6. H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine: An Invention* (New York: Henry Holt, 1895); Kurt Vonnegut Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children’s Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York: Delacorte, 1969).
7. *The Terminator* franchise began in 1984 and continues to the present day. The *Back to the Future* franchise lasted from 1985 to 1990.
8. *Somewhere in Time*, Rastar Pictures, release date October 3, 1980; *The Lake House*, Warner Brothers, release date June 16, 2006.
9. Albert Einstein’s theory of special relativity can be read in much detail in Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 1–68. The specific example is referred to as the “twin paradox.” See Richard P. Feynman, Robert B. Leighton, and Matthew Sands, *The Feynman Lectures on Physics: Mainly Mechanics, Radiation, and Heat* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1963), section 16-2.
10. In *Interstellar*, Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) and Brand (Anne Hathaway) visit a planet with a gravitational time dilation in which an hour on the planet equals seven years off the planet. When Cooper and Brand return to the main ship after a few hours on the planet, twenty-three years had passed on the ship.
11. Richard P. Feynman, *QED: The Strange Theory of Light and Matter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 36–76.
12. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988).
13. Stephen Hawking, *The Universe in a Nutshell* (New York: Bantam Books, 2001), 80.
14. Hawking uses the example of Elvis Presley still being alive; see Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 136.
15. Hawking notes that the “idea that the universe has multiple histories may sound like science fiction, but it is now accepted as science fact.” Hawking, *Universe in a Nutshell*, 80.
16. Erika Holst, “About history, so what? Schools are underfunded and people are sick, You want funding to study the past?” *Illinois Times*, June 26, 2014. <http://illinoistimes.com/article-14115-about-history,-so-what-.html>
17. William Howells, *Back of History* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Company, 1954), 25–26, 86, 103; Christopher Woods, ed., *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7, 33.

18. The best statement on the advent of writing comes from James H. Breasted, *The Conquest of Civilization* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926), 53–54. “The invention of writing and of a convenient system of records on paper has had a greater influence in uplifting the human race than any other intellectual achievement in the career of man. It was more important than all the battles ever fought and all the constitutions ever devised.”
19. Louis Trenchard More, *Isaac Newton: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1934), 176–77. More notes that the phrase was not original to Newton and that its use may have been a social custom and not meant literally. Others have noted that Newton possibly meant this phrase sarcastically; see particularly Frank Manuel, *A Portrait of Isaac Newton* (New York: DaCapo Press, 1968), 145–46.
20. Ed O’Keefe, “National Archives Bans Photos by Tourists,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/federal-eye/2010/01/national_archives_bans_photos.html.
21. Eric Foner, “Historians as Public Figures,” session at American Historical Association Annual Meeting, January 3, 2015, C-SPAN, <http://www.c-span.org/video/?323583-1/historians-public-figures>.
22. Salinea to John Lupton; Michaela to John Lupton; Mykell to John Lupton; Nevea to John Lupton, May 15, 2012, notes in author’s possession.
23. Michael E. Stevens, “Why Documentary Editing Matters,” *Documentary Editing* 30 (Fall and Winter 2008–9): 10.
24. Richard Leffler, “Documentary Editing: Some Essential Elements,” *Documentary Editing* 18 (March 1996): 1.
25. Charles F. Hobson, “Keeping Company with Madison and Marshall,” *Documentary Editing* 19 (March 1997): 2; Phil Chase, “This Editing Life: The Joys and Imperatives of Documentary Editing,” *Scholarly Editing* 35 (2014): 8.
26. See “Notes on the Gettysburg Address,” *The Papers of Abraham Lincoln*, <http://www.papersofabrahamlincoln.org/how-you-can-help/our-search-for-documents/notes-on-the-gettysburg-address>.
27. A frequently cited example is Pauline Maier, “The Founding Revisited,” *Washington Post Book World* 28 (August 2005).
28. Ray Bradbury, *A Sound of Thunder and Other Stories* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 203–15. The story was originally published in *Collier’s* magazine in 1952.
29. *Le Voyage dans la Lune (A Trip to the Moon)*, Star Film, release date September 1, 1902.

30. The Oral History Association notes that “oral history interviews are historical documents that are preserved and made accessible to future researchers and members of the public,” <http://www.oralhistory.org/>.