

EDITORIAL

Reinventing Archival Methods

Kate Cumming, Cassie Findlay, Anne Picot and Barbara Reed

When we initiated the Recordkeeping Roundtable at the start of 2011 as a Sydney-based discussion group designed to foster discussion and debate on issues of interest and relevance to contemporary recordkeeping practice and archives,¹ our aim was to start new conversations in, across and especially outside of the recordkeeping profession. The events we have run have reflected this; we have had guest speakers who are journalists, information security experts, hackers, digital humanists, lawyers and self-described ‘loudmouths’.² We have heard from a curator of digital games concerned about their preservation and access over time,³ information activists testing the boundaries of Australia’s freedom of information laws and systems,⁴ a former senior public servant turned journalist who spoke about the vagaries of information access⁵ and many more. In a way, we have been having these conversations as part of a mission of self-discovery. Perhaps by understanding how others see us, and where our interests and needs intersect, we can identify how we as archivists need to evolve.

That we do need to evolve was the message from David Bearman back in 1989⁶ and from Terry Cook in 1994.⁷ And yet we have not heeded their calls, despite increasing signs that we are in danger of losing sight of what distinguishes our work from that of other kindred professionals and makes our expertise essential in a connected and information-abundant world. With this understanding that our professional methods are not coping with the scale and complexity of contemporary recordkeeping challenges, in late 2012 the Recordkeeping Roundtable convened a two-day workshop, ‘Reinventing Archival Methods’.⁸ Using Bearman’s 1989 essay ‘Archival Methods’ as a touchstone, our aim was to explore how we can fundamentally reassess our methods and determine what can be done to create a stable archival record of the twenty-first century.

The members of the Recordkeeping Roundtable like ongoing conversations. We do not intend the Reinventing Archival Methods workshop to be a one-off event where everyone agreed on a raft of problems but where nothing was initiated to help continue these discussions and to work collaboratively on projects for their resolution.

Therefore, at the conclusion of the workshop, it was decided that members of the Recordkeeping Roundtable would lead the development of two issues papers drawing on discussion and ideas from the workshop. These were published initially on the Recordkeeping Roundtable blog in 2013⁹ and in their final form here. In ‘Reinventing Appraisal’, Kate Cumming and Anne Picot explore the barriers to the contemporary practice of appraisal and propose that recovering the 1990s Australian conception of appraisal may be one of the means of addressing some of the problems. In ‘Reinventing Access’, Barbara Reed considers how, in the age of fragmented legal frameworks, instant online gratification and WikiLeaks, we could reconceptualise and reconnect the parts of the critically important function of providing public access to archives.

In addition to these two core articles, the remainder of this issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* features shorter pieces written in response to the theme of reinvention. In

Recordkeeping Roundtable style, we have invited contributions not only from recordkeeping colleagues, but from people from other disciplines (web design, journalism and so on) and from around the world, including the United Kingdom, China, New Zealand and France. The brief to these authors was for short, thought-provoking responses to the theme of reinventing archival methods. Authors were free to define the theme any way they liked and our goal was for broad debate, engagement and discussion around the theme.

In considering the collection of contributions as a whole, we see both hope but also an urgent need for radical thinking. The contributors clearly argue for the ongoing professional relevance of archivists and the significant community and societal role that the profession plays. They envisage an archival future and map multiple paths that we can and need to follow in order to reach that future. But they also suggest that we need to be radical, that we must look at ourselves and at our professional identity as a necessary part of the reinvention of methods, and importantly that we must look to others who should be a part of that reinvention.

Understandably, none of the contributors claim that reinvention will be easy. Joanne Evans identifies our professional ‘dual imperative – the need to reinvent our own methods as demonstrably unscalable and unsustainable, but to also take on the difficult and thankless task of advocating for “recordness” and “archivalness” in an instant information age’. Sonya Sherman notes that: ‘At a time when archives and records knowledge would seem to be indispensable, we find our methods may not be fit for purpose.’ She adds that Bearman wrote about the volume, fragility and complexity of archival records and that these challenges still remain, but in addition today, ‘in the age of Big Data, we are using capital Vs to describe Volume, Velocity and Variety of contemporary data’.

Looking beyond our professional practice and examining broader societal perceptions and trends, journalist Antony Funnell argues that archivists must understand ‘crucial shifts in societal attitudes toward data’, whereby ‘we have moved from a period of information scarcity to one of over abundance’ where disposability ‘has become a mindset and it’s now as much a characteristic of the digital world as it is of the physical’. He challenges us by saying that this mindset ‘carries with it significant implications for those who deal in history, including archivists and recordkeepers’, reminding us that ‘we keep only what we value’.

Thankfully, all the contributors suggest ways for us to professionally move forward. Julie McLeod and Adelaide Parr say that a path to reinvention lies in being open and flexible in our expectations. McLeod observes that: ‘Perfection is rarely necessary, let alone achievable in the digital context, and striving for it may prevent us from accepting a good enough, fit-for-purpose outcome’; and, she quotes General George Patton to argue that: ‘A good battle plan that you act on today can be better than a perfect one tomorrow.’ Parr concurs, asking whether, before we persuade others ‘to alter their patterns of working, we need to consider whether we are, perhaps, sufficiently flexible to change our own’.

Important points about the need for effective communication and the fact that this is not a traditional skill of archival professionals are made in Mark Crookston’s piece where he observes that archivists are ‘missing the necessary skills to articulate our thinking, methods, and overall value’. To help reinvent our methods, he suggests we need to start by asking ourselves, ‘What is the value of recordkeeping to the information system, and how is it best communicated?’ By understanding this foundation and by then communicating it to others, he suggests we have the potential to fundamentally reinvent archival methods and fundamentally influence the management of contemporary digital

information. Kirsten Wright's piece also emphasises this point, recommending that 'being more open to working with others will encourage a perception of archivists as relevant and useful partners'.

A number of authors provide international perspectives on and examples of reinvention. Nicole Convery from the United Kingdom argues that: 'Recordkeeping professionals should not get mired in what can be perceived as an endless backlog of "legacy" files to be appraised. Rather, they should take time and apply expertise to improve the status quo and, looking forward, should actively develop appraisal criteria for current information to avoid recreating the appraisal backlog for future generations.'

Charlotte Maday and Magalie Moysan show that with reinvented methods in France, 'for the first time, archivists might succeed in implementing appraisal for research data. Today, they fail in imposing selection criteria because they usually receive the archives long after creation and time has already made a "natural selection". Being associated from the beginning of a project will help to impose a strategic policy for data selection.'

Xiaomi An, Hepu Deng and Bin Zhang discuss a proposed new 'participatory recordkeeping and archiving performance assessment framework' in China for 'ensuring the integrity of memories and true histories of the state' and 'for building a cyber-infrastructure for the provision of people-centric knowledge services through recordkeeping and archiving management'.

There is great potential then in international collaboration, but a number of contributors also note the value in other forms of professional collaboration and knowledge exchange. Web designer and developer Luke Bacon sees tremendous potential in our traditional control systems and structures in an online world but also great flexibility in the way that these systems can collectively move forward. He notes that the 'beauty of digital systems is that we can add layers of novel interactivity on top of a robust, accessible base' and he suggests a model for change based on the approach known in web design as progressive enhancement. By adopting this approach, all archives would not have to adopt the same, high-level standards, but rather could move forward in the same direction but at their own pace and in ways that best meet their own specific needs.

Referencing music theory, archivist Michael Jones calls for 'contrapuntal archival methods' which are independent enough to meet specific needs while remaining complementary through their support for common principles. Like Bacon, he argues that there is no requirement for one mandated pathway forwards. 'There cannot be a singular "archival method" or single set of "archival methods"'. Instead, we should look to a shared set of principles, fundamental ideas which can be a foundation for diverse complementary methods.'

The importance of cross-professional collaboration is also made by Cassie Findlay, who flags that: 'Big change generally needs to start with a few small steps'; she argues that to reinvent archival methods, we need to explore what we can learn from others: 'Breaking down boundaries can mean learning from others about what they do and how, rather than remaining in the echo chamber of your own professional discourse.'

And Kirsten Thorpe too advocates profound professional change driven by collaboration, encouraging archivists to 'engage in further research and program development to build conversation around diversity, and the different ways that people manage, transmit and care for knowledge and records'. She argues that: 'Greater awareness should be built around the needs of communities to create practices that recognise that the protocols of one community may be different to another, and subsequently to that of the dominant western paradigm promoted in traditional archival practice.' Her views are

echoed by Belinda Battley, Liz Daniels and Greg Rolan, who suggest that reinvention can come through using a records continuum lens ‘to discover how archival description can better support communities to engage with the records that are important to supporting and maintaining their collective memory’.

Richard Lehane also advocates for innovation in access and description, noting that ‘our descriptive systems shouldn’t be disciplinary straitjackets; they should be platforms that free us to write rich and nuanced documentation’. In an article developed to address the Reinventing Archival Methods theme but available only via the Record-keeping Roundtable blog, Chris Hurley puts forward a proposal to improve access to records, irrespective of what they are and how and where they are held, noting that ‘our finding aids are seen as complicated, time-consuming and unhelpful. We have produced tools that are obstacles rather than aids to use.’¹⁰ This chimes with Adrian Cunningham’s assertion, ‘a record is a record is a record’, and his view that traditionally our methods and professional practices have placed barriers and boundaries around different forms of records and recordkeeping. The different practices and professionals administering to personal, corporate and government recordkeeping hinder rather than enable innovation and enhancement. Today, he argues, these barriers must be broken down and unified systems and approaches be deployed for accessing and managing archives in any environment.

Similar calls for large-scale reinvention are made by Barbara Reed, who argues that we need to rethink our professional approaches, winnowing away the extraneous detail which has often bogged down our previous approaches to reinvention and focusing instead on what is core. Using recordkeeping metadata standardisation as her example, Reed argues that our professional metadata ‘element set standards reflect an obsession with detail, and frankly fail to convey the main point of recordkeeping in ways that can be communicated to other disciplines and professions. Perhaps we’ve been too prescriptive about “describing” the content, underselling the pivotal role of relationships, and not effective enough in emphasising the process. What happens to the information as record are the core things that mean we can rely on and assert authenticity of transactions.’ To reinvent therefore, Reed suggests we need to focus on the specific areas of activity where we can add core value to the digital world.

Andrew Waugh makes a similar point, contending that as recordkeepers, professionally we have endorsed processes that make it ‘acceptable for the record system to be an independent, loosely coupled, system’ divorced from dynamic, collaborative business environments. He states: ‘In my view this is not a viable approach going forward ... I suggest that archivists and records managers need to change our focus on “recordkeeping” record systems.’ Waugh suggests that by slightly changing our perspectives we can reinvent our methods and, more importantly, genuinely better enable good contemporary recordkeeping. He also makes the key point that change in business environments is happening anyway and ‘[b]y ignoring this change we are prolonging the transition for us as archivists and recordkeepers – but not prolonging the change for our organisations as this is happening anyway.’ Really, we need to adapt or die because the world is moving on already without us.

However, in adopting new digital methods and processes, Katrina Dean cautions that we must not lose our advocacy for our paper collections. She argues that ‘[w]hatever its failings which are no doubt considerable, the modern archive is one of the richest sources of information available and documents sides of life (bureaucratic, social, cultural and personal) not repeatable in other sources, oral or public.’ And, as she notes, the costs of creating digital surrogates of our paper collections are significant. ‘A 2010

study by the Collections Trust estimated it would cost 100 billion Euros to digitise the collections of Europe's museums, archives and libraries in addition to up to 25 billion Euros for preservation and access to the digitised collections over 10 years.' It will remain our responsibility for many years, then, to maintain, advocate for and ensure the accessibility of our paper collections and the irreplaceable content they hold.

In considering the collection of responses as a whole, we can see hope and excitement for the future. Tim Sherratt clearly savours the opportunities that are presenting themselves, arguing that '[o]nce we overcome the fear, we can explore the possibilities ... And we should always relish the opportunity to be surprised.' As a whole, the contributions clearly envisage an archival future and map multiple pathways that we can and need to follow in order to reach that future but a dominant theme is also the urgent need for rapid and radical reinvention. And, given our profession's urgent need to move forward, it would also be legitimate to ask whether the proposals for reinvention contained in this journal do indeed go far enough. What other forms of reinvention are required?

Unlike most issues of *Archives and Manuscripts*, this edition is speculative. It does not present answers; indeed, for most of the issues presented there are no answers, instead there are questions, challenges, critical problems and the need for urgent action. The amount of professional practice identified by our contributors as requiring reinvention is large. There is a need for all archivists, in whatever area of professional practice they are involved in, to consider reinvention, to consider how the themes that echo through this edition of the journal (and that have actually echoed through our profession for decades) must take shape and be manifest in profound changes. We look to you to help continue these conversations, to drive forward change and to reinvent archival methods.

Endnotes

1. 'About the Recordkeeping Roundtable', available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/about/>>, accessed April 2014.
2. Jason Scott of Archive Team was the speaker at the Recordkeeping Roundtable event 'Where Do Old Websites Go to Die?' in June 2011, podcast available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2011/06/25/where-do-old-websites-go-to-die-with-jason-scott-of-archive-team-podcast/>>, accessed April 2014.
3. Associate Professor Melanie Swalwell from Flinders University spoke at the Recordkeeping Roundtable event 'Game On! The Challenges of Digital Game Preservation and Why it Matters' in April 2013, report available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2013/04/03/report-from-game-on-the-challenged-of-digital-games-preservation-and-why-it-matters/>>, accessed April 2014.
4. The Recordkeeping Roundtable event 'FOI Under Attack', with Brendan Molloy of the Pirate Party Australia and Paul Farrell, a freelance journalist, considered potential responses to the Hawke review of FOI legislation, available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2012/11/09/foi-under-attack/>>, accessed April 2014.
5. Dr Philip Dorling was a panellist at 'Freedom of Information? A Panel Discussion on Orderly and Disorderly Methods of Information Access and Release, Government Secrecy and What Needs to Change' in February 2012, transcript of talk available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2012/03/24/philip-dorling/>>, accessed April 2014.
6. David Bearman, 'Archival Methods', Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report #9, Archives and Museum Informatics, Pittsburgh, 1989, available at <http://www.archimuse.com/publishing/archival_methods/index.html#ixzz2yGcxM4JW>, accessed April 2014.
7. Terry Cook, 'Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 22, no. 2, November 1994, pp. 300–28, available at <http://archivo.cartagena.es/files/36-164-DOC_FICHERO1/06-cook_electronic.pdf>, accessed April 2014.

8. Report on the 'Reinventing Archival Methods' workshop, available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2012/12/14/reinventing-archival-methods-report-whats-next/>>, accessed April 2014.
9. Recordkeeping Roundtable, 'Reinventing Archival Methods: Issues Papers', September 2013, available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2013/09/28/reinventing-archival-methods-issues-papers/>>, accessed April 2014.
10. Chris Hurley, 'Reinventing Online Access', available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2014/05/26/re-inventing-on-line-access/>>, accessed June 2014.