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Reinventing access

Barbara Reed*

Barbara Reed of Recordkeeping Innovation is a consultant in the field of records, archives and information management with more than 25 years of industry experience in Australia and the Asia Pacific region. Previously she was an academic in recordkeeping at Monash University. Areas of special interest include digital recordkeeping strategies, recordkeeping metadata and standards development for whole-of-government initiatives.

In 1989 David Bearman threw virtual bombs at the practices of the archival profession. In Australia we responded to the emerging issues of digital recordkeeping influenced by Bearman's challenging analysis. However, access has long been an area somewhat neglected within the Australian recordkeeping profession. Addressing this is core to reconceptualising the access function for the future in the digital environment.

Keywords: access; archives; continuum

In 1989 David Bearman threw virtual bombs at the practices of the archival profession. In Australia we responded to the emerging issues of digital recordkeeping influenced by Bearman's challenging analysis. However, access has long been an area somewhat neglected within the Australian recordkeeping profession. Access indeed was not a part of the AS4390 set of standards, which in many ways encapsulated our professional response to digital recordkeeping in the 1990s and attempts to incorporate public access[1] within international recordkeeping standards have failed to gain professional traction.[2] Those professionals specialising in 'reference and access', addressing the 'cultural goals', have long felt isolated and ignored by the development of records continuum thinking.[3] Another way of framing the discussion is to suggest that the concept of public access itself needs to be considered well beyond the walls of the archival institution, and that the artificial splitting of concerns about public access according to age (and custodial thinking) does not serve us well professionally. Addressing this is core to reconceptualising the access function for the future in the digital environment. Public access is not necessarily the same as access to government information, nor does it simply equate to archival access. Increasingly, private organisations are embracing open data initiatives to enable public access and legislation is requiring some access to organisational and indeed, personal, data. Every individual is a key stakeholder in access to records, potentially if not always in practice – not simply the 'users we prefer', already trained and skilled in using our descriptive methods to enable retrieval. Our access frameworks are fragmented into multiple pieces of legislation further complicated by incompatibility across jurisdictional boundaries – while recordkeeping is increasingly location-less.

*Email: B.Reed@records.com.au

How then do we reconceptualise the function of providing public access and reconnect all aspects of public access in the digital environment? The challenges raised by the 'Reinventing Archival Methods' workshop included:

- emphasising the human dimension of archives, acknowledging the place of emotion in archives;
- conceptually reconnecting the public access framework;
- exploring boundaries: digitisation equals access; access equals appraisal;
- defining infrastructure to address these issues – how well do our records/archives systems meet these requirements?

Emphasising the human dimension of archives, acknowledging the place of emotion in archives

Managing records as passive objects or end products is missing an opportunity to connect. Records may be an outcome of a process, but records have also been a mechanism to objectify decision making – to remove the decision making from the consequences of that decision making. Increasingly, we know that records reflect decisions that profoundly affect people, people's lives, and their rights and obligations. While this mantra about rights and obligations has always been in the archival vocabulary, recordkeeping professionals have inevitably reflected the organisational view of records – linked to processes which are described in organisational terms which may or may not be the same as those of the subject of the record – depersonalised perhaps to the 'data subject'.

Records are imbued with people. They are the creators, the processors and often the subject of records. They are the retrievers, users and re-users of records. The acceptance of agents as one of the core metadata entities for recordkeeping underlies this acceptance within our professional practice and is one of the core conceptual building blocks of the elegant Australian Series System.

Many archives have their basis in the shaping of identity that consciously reflects the society or organisational reality that the creators of that archive wished to convey. This is true no less for government archives than for community and organisational archives. Indeed the trend to community archives and the celebration of identity through conscious representation in the archives, or by construction of alternative archives, is a feature of contemporary archival discourse.[4]

The emotional effects of records on the people or relatives of people in the records have never been clearer than in the impact of access to records relating to children removed from family, most particularly evident in the 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report,[5] exhibitions and proactive archival involvement. The development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander *Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services*, published in 1995 by the Australian Library and Information Association,[6] provides a great model for engagement with particular communities. The provision of counselling services and trusted advisors to persons affected by disturbing revelations in records also emerged at this time. The spate of enquiries, commissions and initiatives to acknowledge damage and assist children removed from family through migration or forced adoption, or children in institutional care, has culminated in Australia with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.[7] Here issues of access to records run up against organisational barriers, and it is somewhat disturbing not to find recordkeeping professionals always front and centre in contextualising, explaining and assisting interpretation of records relevant to the affected community

and organisations. Indeed, anecdotal tales of poor and insensitive presentation of records to individuals from this community can be shaming to hear. While, when alerted to the potential impact, archivists clearly step up to the mark to provide access appropriately, does this sensitivity to impact operate across the recordkeeping spectrum? What can be done to recognise the emotional impact of people's lives in records? When does abstract interest supersede provision of sensitive access? Is it age of the record? Is it the circumstances of the research? Is it the relationship of the person to the case? What impact does the 'channel' of the delivery have – should protocols more generally be developed to enable sensitive information to be delivered more appropriately? Who determines what is sensitive? Can this be unified across sites of access – the Web, in the creating organisation or in the archival reading room?

If people are central to records, what can we do to enable and privilege this? And how appropriate is this? Personal information has never been more important to individuals, yet privacy and personal data protection are often considered to be antithetical to archival concerns. Do we understand the dimensions of privacy protection appropriately? Knee-jerk reactions which cause oppositional stances between the protections of personal information and the recordkeeping profession are inappropriate. To what extent can metadata management, the flagging of records containing personal information, the permissions accorded by individuals to records – following the crowd-sourced appraisal model of the census returns[8] – be incorporated into our practice to enforce individuals' wishes for managing their personal information better?

Once we have information about people in our records, is it ours? Are there limits to what is appropriate use? The interesting case of the mooted 'Right to Forget' Directive in Europe raises the ire of French archivists concerned for the continuation of recordkeeping as we have known it,[9] but also provides a great opportunity to embrace a different model of constructing recordkeeping, one more interactive, more respectful to the wishes of the person about whom information is being created/captured.

What happens when information retrieval and semantic technologies – digitisation, text extraction, topic modelling, linked open data, image classification and so on – remove the veil of privacy through obscurity that has traditionally protected much of the private information in paper records? The potential of creating much more deeply interlinked archival and recordkeeping systems provides exciting pathways for exploring and understanding archives. But when the data relates to you, me or people who are active participants in our records, are the rules different? Public access to Commonwealth data in Australia is now typically available at 20 years after the transaction – but that is data potentially about each one of us. Should this be available for searching, classifying, mashing, merging and linking? By commercial or government entities, or just by private citizens? Should we be redefining our access regimes and rules not on age at all, but on personal versus other information? Can these new technologies help by allowing much finer-grained access controls? What are the limits of personal information – are they the details of the people in the event logs (the recordkeeping process metadata) as well as the people involved in the substance of the transactions? The public concern expressed for privacy in the proposed retention of data from ISP and telephone companies in the recent inquiry into national security legislation[10] is about just this capacity to mine relationships, make connections and construct stories. The cry that it's just metadata was a welcome addition of the word to the public sphere, but scary in that it revealed a significant technical naivety among our legislators.

Users of archives want access to personal information, evident in the success of the new providers of aggregated access to archives – the genealogy technology companies

such as Ancestry.com. We should be far more engaged and understanding of the possibilities and management of personal information. Traditional appraisal thinking has steered us away from considering case records or transactional records as the matter of archives. Yet it is just these records that are now within our technological competence to manage but we have no clear professional or socially acceptable articulation of our role in managing such personal information.

New ways of engaging with records, with public access across time and sites of access provision, with the users and the people in records, are needed to reinvent our access practices now and into the future. Opportunities are presented to us, but we need to engage actively with multiple communities to work through alternatives. For example, are we simply managing access to our archival holdings or are we responsible for implementing a more engaged access model suited to all environments?

Conceptually reconnecting the public access framework

Our access frameworks are fragmented almost beyond the capacity to recapture a cohesive framework for public access. This reflects the significant change from the situation where access was a privilege accorded under archives and public records legislation to the present situation, where access, at least to personal information, is a right.

The UNESCO *Declaration on Archives* states: 'Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life.'[11] The open data movement, most evident in access to public sector information initiatives, advocates the future in data: 'Data allows us to adapt and improve public services and businesses and enhance our whole way of life, bringing economic growth, wide-ranging social benefits and improvements in how government works.'[12] The wave of reform of freedom of information or right to information legislation with its emphasis on proactive disclosure, following in the wake of the UK initial impetus in this area, puts the focus onto accountability and transparency of government information. While seemingly restricted to government institutions, the trend to openness and re-use of data is also to be seen in the vendor-driven push for endless data retention under the rubric of big data and data mining in commercial organisations.

But all this is happening in fundamentally disconnected ways. As specific problems arise, new legislation is rushed forward to plug the gap. The access framework even for public institutions is actually contained in at least four different sets of legislation, and because this is largely a state-based function, no consistency is apparent across jurisdictional boundaries. Worse, access to records living outside the archival organisation is subject to management from many disciplines essentially grappling for ascendancy – and the recordkeeping profession largely fails to be at the table, with a multitude of other information disciplines filling the gap.

So what are the opportunities for knitting the framework back together again? A conceptual picture of the landscape for both public and private organisations would be the first useful step. Identifying the many opportunities for connecting with information wherever it resides – not just within the walls of the institutional archives – is essential. This involves coming to grips with the reality of the distributed network of information that is the current technology environment we inhabit.

We need a coherent professional view about what the role of access is – what is the relationship of the archive(s) with the information technology reality we have in the slippery, ever-changing, technological omnipresence in which we operate? With the 'release' of public information all over the Web, through legal means (such as proactive

disclosure, open data publishing) or alternative means (such as leaking, exposures in WikiLeaks-style journalism), what then is the role of archives – is it really restricted to considerations only of those things living inside the custodial walls of the institution? What role do or should archives have in relation to organisations such as the Internet Archive, or the concept of the Web itself as the archives, and Google as the gateway to all archives? This is the early technology realisation of Derrida's 'all is archive' – what is our professional response?

We need to fight the fragmentation of access that is occurring within organisations too. The understandable emphasis on information security using standards such as ISO 27000 management standards is further pushing considerations of system security onto the contents of these systems – but clearly being seen from a specific technological point of view. This is indicative of the fragmentation of access and security within organisations in which the emerging push to information governance (not data governance, not system governance) offers an opportunity for recordkeeping professionals to seize an active participation role – if we can skill up to take it. And the construction of access within accepted regimes from the time of the records creation in a coherent fashion makes application with retroactive access a much less onerous task.

A focusing of the conceptual understandings of, and responsibilities for, access will quickly reveal that public access, for government information at least, is not happening in only the reading room or via the archives email or Web interface. It is happening across organisations. We need to:

- connect with the information disclosure or publication requirements under various freedom of information (FOI) regimes;
- incorporate published data into the archival interfaces (if not physically managing the information, providing the contextual layer at least); and,
- explore the capacity to link existing contextual information in archival systems for open data sets.

For example, rather than every individual department independently publishing lists of material opened under FOI, such as legislation, why could these not be considered differently? Instead of publishing a single lengthy list to meet the requirements of the law, why not a list linked specifically to the functions and activities represented on the organisational webpage? Alternatively, the list could be deposited with a central government data store, linked to the open data sets and accompanied by the contextual information from archival control systems to promote their availability wherever required. The example of NSW State Records Digital Archives providing the NSW 'Publications' portal linked to their contextual descriptive system provides a great proto-model for practical applications, leading to a potential reconceptualising of the recordkeeping and archives role.

Exploring boundaries: digitisation equals access; access equals appraisal

Digitisation equals access

Within the workplace, potentially in the public mind, most obviously present in the work of digital humanities scholars at present, and rather disturbingly within archives institutions themselves, the simplification that digitisation equals access is often sloppily to the fore. This needs to be broken apart and considered in detail. At the base of this is the transformation of format – from analogue to digital. Badly constructed digitisation

projects are simply that – format transformation. Connected to well-thought-out processes, of course this format transformation allows connection to digital systems. Quite radically different dissemination mechanisms do transform access – enabling multiple simultaneous users, not dependent on a physical location, with endless replicability at high quality.

'Clever photocopying' is one aspect. Converting to formats capable of digital manipulation is another. The assumption that the digital is now *the* record is disturbing. Actually, the record remains the thing on which the business action was done. Different rules then apply depending on which format is the record, and which is the copy. The proliferation of digitisation standards in all jurisdictions indicates that these concepts need articulation and that, generally speaking, the difference is not clearly understood.

The focus on digitisation as a dissemination technology is a great thing. But have we really understood the compromises we are making by adopting the third-party commercial arrangements that are commonly used by archival institutions? Are we, in effect, outsourcing our archives? The business model of compromising free access in return for the costs of digitisation must be a good thing in order to achieve the transformation of past paper records into digital surrogates. But the models and mechanisms in commercial exploitation should be subject to greater clarity and investigation to ensure that we are not fatally compromising the validity of the archives institution. Ancestry.com has become the archive for genealogists – and it has done a superb job, enabling access to multi-national resources through one interface. But is there an equivalence to our library colleagues who are increasingly finding the trade-offs with publishers' digital subscription models unpalatable? We have our own set of imposed conditions – such as only being able to provide free public access for a specific period bound to a physical location such as the reading room. What will happen in the 10-year restricted period? In this dynamic technical environment, is this too long to tie up resources? In what form will the material currently in the commercially restricted systems be available for free public access through the archives? – you can bet that it will not have the clever multiplier linked enhanced searching that is provided by the commercial providers. Are we trading more than just our records when we enter into these deals? What of the intangible goods such as the volunteer labour being harnessed by sites like Ancestry.com to transcribe, annotate and index our digitised archives? Will this user-generated content be shared back with archives along with the digital images? And, if not, will volunteers be willing to duplicate that effort when the exclusivity period expires?

Is the archives a physical location and repository as a defence against the encroaching non-physicality of the Internet? Is it the physical thing, the repository of holdings rather than the provider of access? Can these roles be usefully separated? Are we setting ourselves up to fail, as we construct bespoke digital preservation programs focusing on small-scale, hand-crafted, usually format-based preservation techniques?

And what of the assumption that this is digital recordkeeping? It kind of is, because once digital, the images and the metadata constructed to surround them do need to be managed as digital resources, but really this is not the same as managing the tsunami of born digital that are being created – but not transferred to archives – in creating agencies. And there are so many problems with continuing to conceptualise access to archives as being only accessible through the prism of archival systems within the custodial walls. Many of the elements of the archival systems – the contextual, functional, structural provenance links essential to interpreting that information over time – are needed in organisations currently struggling to manage digital records. And are we

managing digital records? The work of Frank Upward and colleagues is commencing a reconceptualisation of recordkeeping as a component of appropriate management of any digital information. Recordkeeping Informatics is a liberating conceptualisation, again allowing a dynamic space for professional interaction in workplaces beyond the narrow conceptualisation of electronic document and records management systems.

Access equals appraisal

This equation invites exploration of the linkage between access and appraisal. The two professional practices should not be seen as completely independent. The pairing invites consideration of the reality that records are only created if they are required for some form of future access. If records do not exist, they cannot be accessed. If records cannot be accessed, they might as well not exist. Access here does not mean that records are created for the purposes of archival access and particularly not access once past the custodial threshold. Access embraces use in doing business, in supporting decision making, in providing evidence now and into the future. In making the equation work, the conceptualisation of appraisal must be located firmly in the Australian articulation of appraisal as a continuous, analytic process focused on business context. Appraisal in these terms results in a continuing assessment of records requirements providing the basis for recordkeeping rules, including documenting context and defining what records should be created and the appropriate rules to continuously manage records in relation to risk, access, migration and disposal.

As argued in the accompanying 'Reinventing Appraisal' paper, setting up records that will last for the time that they are needed is a core recordkeeping endeavour requiring focus on metadata structures to capture the appropriate descriptive and contextual elements for their interpretation. But appraisal, particularly in the digital environment, is a continuous process, and the demands of technology-dependent digital records require constant attention to this nexus of appraisal and access.

Defining infrastructure to address these issues – how well do our records and archives systems meet these requirements?

The role of the records and archives system comes under scrutiny whenever the adequacy of digital recordkeeping is discussed. Using the conceptual models inherent in our home-grown Australian Series System, records are surrounded by always-expanding amounts of metadata in multiple systems, reaching out to audiences from those within the organisation to those in the public sphere, increasingly concurrently. The series system is conceptually based upon the idea of inheritance. We have lost this notion of linkage, inheritance and ever-growing metadata in the practicalities of our paper-derived transfer protocols requiring box lists, manifests or transmission lists. Records cross custodial thresholds as discrete objects, often without the rich metadata that surrounds their creation and management in creating systems.

Can we reclaim this idea of inheriting rich metadata, and what would happen if we could? Conceptually, the building blocks are in place. Could we use archival contextual systems to link back to the front ends of agencies' records on the Web? What creative uses of the contextual metadata can be found/made?

Our rich conceptual metadata models are based on the notion of relationships – relationships both within records themselves aggregating into multiple strings of transaction, and between core entities of people, business and records. Our practice in

implementing these relationships has been lacking. Lacking in precision of definition of relationships – we are still largely working with paper-based articulation of relationships, including the ubiquitous 'otherwise related' relationship clump. Relationships should prove a fertile ground for research and exploration. They potentially provide exploration of records transversely, vertically and horizontally. Exposing and utilising relationships opens up new ways of exploiting records and it is highly compatible with the types of relationship linking on the Web, yet within our own professional systems it is undervalued and under-exploited. To build upon relationships, these need to be separately identified and described, and then inherited by all subsequent systems managing the records. What opportunities exist in the world of the Semantic Web, and in linked open data? The series system, and our multi-entity recordkeeping metadata standards with their relationship statements already providing the central structuring feature, seem like an immediate fit with the expression of Resource Description Framework triples. Isn't this a machine representation format made for the series system? If this can be done using Encoded Archival Description in the UK, surely we can do it here.

This discussion presupposes that our descriptive systems are appropriate. Are they? This question is raised, appropriately, whenever public access is discussed. Archives and records systems are primarily devised on principles suited to our recordkeeping profession.[13] We insist upon the centrality of provenance and context entities such as agents and mandates. The often-heard debate from newcomers to archives, particularly those from other information disciplines, is that this emphasis is inappropriate. Even Daniel Caron, late of Library and Archives Canada, has suggested that 'perhaps it would be easier, wiser and more logical simply to recognise and admit that provenance is an out-dated analogue concept which does not translate well to the digital infosphere of the computing cloud'.[14] Users, except those steeped through training and use of archives in our control systems, by and large hate our systems. Most recently, Zoe D'Arcy described observing users interact with Records Search at the National Archives of Australia as being like 'watching a train wreck'.[15] Yet die-hard archivists refuse to give up the notion of provenance and relationships. Why? What are the fundamental reasons for this and why is it so difficult to assert this without always having to re-argue the case with professionals from different backgrounds?

One issue may well be that the early forms of automation of our records and archives systems essentially automated paper systems and the paper systems fundamentally served the professionals not the people who used them. So is one interpretation that we need to quite radically reconceptualise the user front end? And what would this look like?

The work of Dr Tim Sherratt[16] and Dr Mitchell Whitelaw[17] is instructive in providing different ways of engaging with collections. Visualisations as front ends? Why not? Why not enable relationships, already present in our systems, to be represented as pathways for user exploration? Our archival systems are loved by those involved in data hacks, where the availability of such rich, complex and interesting public data is a treasure trove for experimentation – sometimes even linked to digital images. But are we really enabling ourselves to take advantage of such initiatives? The resulting apps are experiments, fragile and unsustainable in isolation. How can archival institutions harness the imaginative power of such work? And while we may be thrilled with such work, we should never forget that this is primarily about access to the metadata in the systems, and building multiple front ends is only possible because of the rich metadata in those systems. How can we use the exemplars to reconceive front end interfaces for the public? Can we reconceptualise access paths to all digital records within our jurisdictional scope using the same techniques?

Conclusion

What is clear is that we need to re-cohere the view about what the professional role in public access is, to respond to the complexity of current access regimes and to relocate access considerations within recordkeeping.

Addressing the demand for greater responsiveness from what we have in the past thought of as the 'subject' of the records, means we must develop new ways of engaging with records beyond the institutional walls and the custodial framework. We need better protocols for handling personal information, from the point of records creation to administering the rights of access in a context removed from the original transaction. Our metadata concept of *agent* should explicitly include both sides of transactions to embrace the subject's rights, not only those of the organisation. Inevitably, this cannot wait until the records 'age' sufficiently for public access in the decent obscurity of an archival searchroom.

The profession should seize the opportunity afforded by the push to information governance as a means to regain our seat at the table and help organisations deal with the complexity of public access regulation and demands. We can offer a more interactive model of recordkeeping, responsive to the interests of all parties and realising the full potential of the rich metadata which contemporary records systems typically accrue but which is so often discarded in custodial arrangements with the archives. The new technologies and the current demand for utilising government data offer us examples and opportunities for doing access differently, whether it is crowd-sourced additions to public data sources or providing links and rich contextual information to enhance discovery and comprehension, such as the NSW State Records Digital Archives is providing in its NSW 'Publications' portal.

Some of this may be new, such as centring access within the appraisal framework and reconceptualising recordkeeping as a necessary component of managing any and all digital information. Much of it is not. Every archival institution with microfilm has had to address the challenges associated with reformatting records for the provision of access. What it requires above all is seeing the environment of change in technologies and demands as opportunities to be grasped, not a call to arms to defend the archival citadel.

Endnotes

1. Note: this discussion has been limited to public access rather than the intricacies of internal access within organisations, which have largely been professionally articulated in international standards such as ISO 15489.
2. An attempt at getting international agreement, via the ISO records community, was made in 2003–2004, but this was not successful and was subsequently abandoned.
3. Paul Macpherson, 'Theory, Standards and Implicit Assumptions: Public Access to Post-Current Government Records', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 30, no 1, May 2002, pp. 6–17.
4. For further exploration, see a number of recent issues of *Archival Science*, particularly the Special Issue on Memory Identity and the Archival Paradigm, vol. 13, nos 2–3, June 2013.
5. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families*, Commonwealth of Australia, April 1997, available at <*https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/bringing-them-home-report-1997*>, accessed 14 February 2014.

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13. Cassie Findlay, 'People, Records and Power. What Archives Can Learn From WikiLeaks', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 41, no. 1, March 2013, pp. 7–22.

14. Daniel Caron, 'Reflections on the Evolution of Appraisal at Library and Archives Canada. From Content to Context to Content Through Context, Speaking Notes for Daniel J. Caron, National Archives of the Netherlands', 2012, available at <*http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/news/speeches/Pages/reflections-evolution-appraisal-lac.aspx*>, accessed 14 February 2014.

15. Zoe D'Arcy, tweet from Digital Treasures Symposium, Canberra, 21 June 2013.

16. Dr Tim Sherratt, see <*http://discontents.com.au/*>, accessed 14 February 2014.

17. Dr Mitchell Whitelaw, see <*http://mtchl.net*>, accessed 14 February 2014.