

Archives as multifaceted narratives: linking the ‘touchstones’ of community memory

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Records can help communities to construct and preserve their collective memory, acting as ‘touchstones’ in support of community values, survival and protection of rights.¹ Records can be considered evidence² – not simply in the legal sense – but of individual personhood, providing validation of experience and a sense of self.³ Thus collective memory is an essential part of community and individual identity. Rebecca Knuth describes the ‘National Archives [as] an institution charged by the government with maintaining the documentary basis of national identity’,⁴ defining who belongs and who does not. The records that it holds ‘document the choices societies make about how they define who their people are’.⁵ Similarly, Terry Cook suggests the focus of archival theory has moved from evidence to memory, to these concerns of identity and community, and that the archivist has been transformed from a passive curator to a community facilitator.⁶

Perhaps paradoxically, records also represent stories and meanings that are different for each individual, while relating to the same ‘fact’ or ‘event’, and all of these perspectives are ‘real’ and relevant despite often contradicting each other. To maintain collective and individual memory, community members need control over their records’ creation, capture, access, use, sharing and interpretation. This does not preclude some of those records remaining in the custody of archival institutions but does have implications for how those institutions provide access and allow users to interact with those records and their metadata. For example it provides a new descriptive imperative for

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allowing communities to link their own metadata to records relating to themselves – either within the systems of the institutions, or within the community’s own information systems. Changing the ‘hospitality’ of archives to accept the granular and multifaceted nature of the narratives in the record requires an intellectual and often emotional shift on a large scale. And complicating this shift is the reality of records: held by many different organisations and individuals, in many different formats; often comprising enormous quantities of poorly described and disconnected data; and with description often designed with archival management rather than community engagement in mind. The challenge for archival methods is to ensure that community members have awareness of and access to all of the records that are of potential significance to them. This is a complex problem; however three avenues of investigation for addressing these issues are presented here.

A first approach is an attempt to enable archives and records to accommodate multiple meanings and narratives by forging a new methodology for archival practice and control akin to ‘new history’⁷ whereby documents and records are seen as contested sites of interpretation and, from a Foucaultian point of view, power and discursive practice.⁸ Of similar relevance is the role archives and records play in the construction of ‘othered’ identities and, correspondingly, how they can contribute to the empowerment of those who have been ‘othered’. Not only do records hold evidence about people and their ‘self’, but research in a variety of fields shows how important a degree of control over this sense of self is to an individual’s wellbeing.⁹ Thus if archival institutions are to function ethically and effectively, they must ensure people retain control over records relating to themselves. How can such an approach be adopted without omitting any voices, nor damaging the integrity of records themselves?

A second approach is to explore the way a community uses its records for collective memory, and how archivists can support communities to maintain their own heritage. Barbara Reed, in the issue paper ‘Access Today’, asks how well our existing records and archives systems meet community requirements.¹⁰ For example, the series system is said to support description of records in multiple contexts, to allow multiple views of records, more accurate description of born-digital records and more open linking to allow for searching across multiple collections, making archives more discoverable in the wider community.¹¹ However, as Zoe D’Arcy has pointed out, often users are not finding these benefits.¹² Is the problem with the series system, or the way it has been implemented? Perhaps a records continuum lens can be employed to discover how archival description can better support communities to engage with the records that are important to supporting and maintaining their collective memory.

Finally, calls have been made over almost 20 years for a federated archival commons that would facilitate ubiquitous and homogeneous community-based discovery of, and access to, multifaceted records.¹³ Thus far, recordkeeping and archival documentation standards emphasise compliance of extant systems over aspirational considerations; they tend to be empirical rather than conceptually driven; and, they do not possess interoperability and openness as primary goals.¹⁴ Similarly, current archival control systems, and particularly their web-based discovery and access interfaces, tend to be heterogeneous and insular. They are geared toward the institutional or academic researcher and do not support real-time meshing of records from multiple sources.¹⁵ What conceptual metadata modelling, standards setting and systems design is required to establish such an archival commons?

The shift to acknowledging multifaceted meanings in archives has already commenced but is far from over and far from embedded in archival practice. If the archives

are to be democratised, as Terry Cook suggests is appropriate for today's social ethos,¹⁶ communication patterns and community requirements of the digital age, as well as methods allowing communities control over their own access, management and interpretation of their records of collective memory, need to be an essential part of the archivist's toolkit. The fear of 'sharing power' relates to a fear of losing power or losing control. If instead it can be framed as multiple control – people retaining control over their 'own stuff' – then interoperability, access and participation can be entrenched as primary pillars of archival practice.

Endnotes

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