

Reinventing archival methods: am I part of the problem or part of the solution?

Mark Crookston*

Mark Crookston tries to be a good archivist. He has worked in film archives, government archives and research libraries. His favourite day as an archivist was destroying records (legally) by throwing them out a window onto a bonfire.

I try to be a good archivist. I am driven by the want to make the information system robust and efficient enough to support good governance; to enable communities (whoever they are) to have access to documentation to support their rights and entitlements, so that society can critique itself. I have convinced myself that this is a honourable way to spend a career. My resolve in this cause has become stronger the more I realise that I most definitely cannot be doing all of this for the money. But this profession of ours seems to be struggling to address the well-known challenge of implementing that robust and efficient information system in a digital age with limited resources and waning influence. How did it come to this? I am not going to even attempt to answer that question, but I do have a couple of other questions that I have been struggling with of late that I am trying to find the answers to. They are making me doubt whether I am being a good archivist. The questions are:

- (1) *Are the theories and principles that drive my actions, rooted in 1990s Australian and Canadian thinking, part of the problem or part of the solution?;* and,
- (2) *Are the methods I use to implement this thinking part of the problem or part of the solution?*

In other words, am I a reinventor or in need of reinvention? Hopefully this exercise in briefly responding to the reinventing archives questions will help me form an answer.

Disposal

I think the most I have ever lasted in a conversation that was specifically about the continuum model has been 10 minutes. I find that eyes start to glaze over as soon as the words ‘dimension’ and ‘pluralise’ are used within 20 seconds of each other. However, in the six years I was an appraisal archivist I did nothing but talk and try to act according to the continuum – usually without specifically mentioning it. I contend that its emphasis on control over custody and approaching information management as an entire system is still the right conceptual approach with which to address our challenges. But for some reason we (including me) have not been that good at selling the continuum and convincing others (and maybe ourselves) that it is the right approach. I

*Email: crookston.mark@gmail.com

should not have to sell a conceptual model, but I have struggled to find a simple, snappy and well-articulated value proposition and recordkeeping approach in any of the Australasian jurisdictions. In a time when whole-of-government ICT strategies are being developed and systems thinking is driving so much activity, it seems that our own model is more fit for purpose than ever, but we seem to have gone a little shy of saying so.

As an appraisal archivist I influenced many government agencies to develop classification schema and disposal schedules – the key mechanisms of control from before creation. I wrote several disposal schedules myself; I gave advice and helped shepherd scores of them through the Chief Archivist's approval process; I wrote the implementation guidelines for government departments; and topped my time off in the appraisal team at Archives NZ with a mandatory disposal standard. Great stuff!

But there is one underlying problem with my time in the disposal hot seat – the system was no more robust or efficient when I finished than when I started. Sure, I got some wins, but they were small fry in relation to the information system as a whole. For starters, the control mechanisms I helped embed were still limited to functions as defined through the limiting lens of an agency; then they were heavily reliant on implementation via classifications schema applied to electronic document and records management systems (EDRMS). The resulting story was almost always the same – relatively low-value corporate records were being managed better, but the business systems providing evidence of core functions were not so much. I contend that custodial thinking is still at play. The EDRMSs are well managed because we have got control over them, but we have been shy in influencing the management of records in core business systems (despite all the standards). The functions as applied to an agency were 'your functions', and there was little interest in extending control outside of agency borders. Add to this the cost of implementing, which still requires significant investment in human expertise rather than being programmatically inserted into the system.

The theory is sound, but the methods for implementation seem outdated. I did not do much about that.

But at the same time, my experience tells me some 1990s methods do translate well into contemporary practice. A particularly pleasing implementation of Terry Cook's exemplary and exceptional selection methodologies from 'Many Are Called But Few Are Chosen'¹ for the intellectual property system made me feel I was part of the solution. It required some tweaks but it is still a great lens through which to address seemingly overwhelming amounts of records. Sampling seems to have gone out of vogue, but there are good methods available. A delicate appraisal of records relating to a particularly vulnerable community that borrowed heavily from Verne Harris made me feel like I had fulfilled my social justice objectives. In cases like these I had to insert myself into the system and argue hard for the validity of the method. They were expensive interventions for relatively small amounts of records. But once the decision to intervene was made, the methods served me and the relevant communities well.

I guess I am saying that the intervention points seem to have been critical to success. The need to be both macro and micro is important. I think we have got the model for the macro (a few more promoters of it translated into a value proposition would help) and some good methods for the micro, but when it comes to establishing appropriate controls for the big bits in between, I feel I gave in to custodial methods. So in this area, I could do with some reinvention.

Description and access

My time with the disposal function may leave me with some uncertainty about my contribution, but in writing this I realise I am pretty pleased with my descriptive and access contributions. Maybe this is just because I am a recent convert to the significance of the access function to my overall objectives, and I am yet to have the distance with which to look back on its distinct averageness.

Here is part of a conversation I had recently.

Linked open data expert: Do you realise that [your archival management system] is linked data?

Me: Yes, all archival descriptive systems are.

Linked open data expert: Oh.

We archivists have much to offer here, and in many ways I feel we are ahead of the game. The series system is just some entities with relationships. Its simplicity and relevance is magnificent. I remember how enlightened I felt when I realised that. With description, we have got some challenges in trying to migrate records from whatever systems they are in to an archival system, but we should be good at this. It is just about managing metadata. I was proud to be part of the team (with my excellent colleagues Anna Henry and Hywel Williams) at Archives NZ who reconceptualised the model with which items can be described and related. The principles of provenance and original order meant we had to promote automation of this process as much as possible, by utilising the existing metadata and relationships inherent in sometimes complex creation systems and getting out of the way. It felt natural.

On the access side, our emphasis on delivering an authentic thing with proven integrity and getting out of the way is more relevant than ever. I contend that it is a lot more relevant than the other parts of our memory sector which have strong traditions of interpretation. The digital age has made interpreters of all citizens and we archivists should not waste our time (which could clearly be devoted to targeted disposal interventions) getting in the way.

I have recently written a policy for use and reuse of collections. The most noticeable characteristic of the excellent discussions that contributed to the policy was the difference in thinking between the custodial and post-custodial. We are by no means agreed on our conceptual models here, but I feel that my adherence to the need to pluralise with as little intervention as possible has improved the framework in New Zealand. The post-custodial thinking is serving me, and my sector, well. Now we have just got to let go of our metadata and let others play with it.

Conclusion

Coming to the end of this exercise, I acknowledge I have only very briefly addressed my two questions and seem to have picked up another one along the way. Addressing the initial questions, I think I am both part of the reinvention and in need of reinvention. The underlying systems thinking of the continuum and adherence to the principles of authenticity and integrity have served my sector and me well. I have had some difficulty with some of the methods though, especially with my contribution to the disposal

function. The underlying commonality is that when my colleagues and I have been able to directly intervene ourselves, our methods have been OK. When our intervention requires others to do something well, we have not been so successful. This is not intended to shift responsibility, rather to highlight that we seemed to be missing the necessary skills to articulate our thinking, methods and overall value to the information system to the other parts of that system. Addressing this question will help us reinvent our methods:

What is the value of recordkeeping to the information system, and how is it best communicated?

Endnote

1. Terry Cook, “‘Many Are Called, But Few Are Chosen’: Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files”, *Archivaria*, no. 32, Summer 1991, available from <<http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/viewFile/11759/12709>>, accessed 14 March 2014.