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Reflections on the promise and pitfalls in reinventing recordkeeping metadata

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Transforming recordkeeping metadata management infrastructure lies at the heart of the challenges raised in the 2012 Reinventing Archival Methods Recordkeeping Roundtable Forum and subsequent Access and Appraisal issue papers. Both issues papers give examples of where our current 'fast paper' processes, practices and systems fail to deliver for ourselves, our users and ultimately for recordkeeping in society. Most disturbingly is where we are not even at the table as professionals in the situations in which we have a stake, and where there is a desperate need for an archival systems solution.

Why is it recordkeeping metadata that matters? Yes I am one of those recordkeeping metadata aficionados/zealots/tragics. It fascinates, excites, puzzles, intrigues and troubles me. It is the stuff that makes recorded information objects into records, binding them to the contexts in which they were created, managed and used, so that they function as authentic and reliable evidence and perform their part(s) in personal, organisational and societal memory. Recordkeeping metadata is complex and multi-faceted, itself a record of transactional and evidential relationships echoing through space and time. It has a degree (or more) of difficulty over other kinds of metadata which just describe static states, as it is integral to the authenticity, reliability, accuracy and usability of records today, tomorrow and beyond. Simplistic recordkeeping metadata models can sometimes work, but often fail to equip us with scalable, sustainable, resilient and responsive systems, practices and tools for the digital and networked information age.

As the past 20 years since Bearman's *Archival Methods*[1] has shown, it is easy to say that we need to transform our processes, practices and systems for recordkeeping metadata creation, management and use. Time has shown that this is much, much harder to do. Why? Partly it is about understanding and appreciating the enormity of the task. It requires a fifty- rather than a five-year research, development and implementation agenda, with a litany of technical, social, cultural, economic and political challenges. Problem is that recordkeeping is an infrastructure, a network of 'pervasive enabling resources', which like all good infrastructure aims to be invisible.[2] That means it, and we, get taken for granted. One could argue that we have achieved that with our paper recordkeeping infrastructures, as those technically transforming our world with digital and networked information technologies seem oblivious to archival and record-

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keeping requirements and the need to involve us professionally. But this invisibility also makes it hard to make the case for investment in archival and recordkeeping redesign and redevelopment.

Infrastructures are also unwieldy to change because of the multiple interconnections and dependencies between the components. As we found in the Clever Recordkeeping Metadata Project, our Metadata Broker was not viable in an automated paper record-keeping paradigm.[3] However, we put forward the idea that it had the potential to be a catalyst for transforming to a recordkeeping services-oriented approach, if we began to reconceptualise and redevelop our own recordkeeping tools, to free up the rich record-keeping metadata in them in machine-processable forms, in turn re-engineering business (including our recordkeeping business) processes. Then, and now, we are at a crossroads. Continuing to shore up our existing infrastructure with incremental digital plugins may be putting in place larger barriers to their transformation. Pragmatic compromises are inevitable, but we need to also enable critical reflection on their consequences.

Exponential expansion in the continuum of recorded information is another factor which not only makes transformation difficult, but also an imperative.[4] And it is a dual imperative – the need to reinvent our own methods as demonstrably unscaleable and unsustainable, but also to take on the difficult and thankless task of advocating for 'recordness' and 'archivalness' in an instant information age.

From my own systems development experience, I know of the relative ease in building information systems for the here and now; oblivious to accountability and evidential requirements beyond a system's operational lifespan or reach. At the moment, adding such requirements, if recognised at all, is seen as a burden, and so relegated to the bottom of the requirements pile. I would like to be part of transforming that attitude, making it desirable, necessary and do-able and I see reinvented recordkeeping metadata as a possible way of making this happen. What would happen if we took a Recordkeeping Analytics approach, envisioning recordkeeping metadata not as an overhead and a cost, but as an information asset from which real-time insight into how both the business, and the business of recordkeeping (whether that might be in an organisation, an archival institution or across a range of them), are performing? For this we need to enable the automated capture of lots of it in machine-processable forms at transactional layers, which can then be mined, meshed and augmented with the higher level stuff in our governance frameworks, and the insights gained able to be pumped back into business and recordkeeping processes and systems. Could for example such a framework proactively identify inappropriate recordkeeping risks? I would like to imagine so and would certainly like to give it a try. Having been part of the development of the ISO 23081 Recordkeeping Metadata standard, I feel that that we have a dynamic and relational model which would be the foundation for this kind of development.[5] It makes it complex, but also highly aspirational.

As a metadata tragic I can envision a recordkeeping metadata architecture that could enable us to cleverly, smartly and sophisticatedly tackle today's appraisal and access issues. But it is a radical transformation from what we have at the moment, and to get there we would need an agile, iterative and coordinated research, development and implementation program. I would like to be part of stepping up to these challenges – not stepping away from them – and continuing the Australian tradition of being at the forefront of archival and recordkeeping innovation.

Endnotes

1. 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*>, accessed 24 August 2013.
2. Geoffrey C Bowker et al., 'Toward Information Infrastructure Studies: Ways of Knowing in a Networked Environment', in *International Handbook of Internet Research*, Jeremy Hunsinger, Lisbeth Klastrup and Matthew Allen (eds), Springer, Dordrecht, 2010, pp. 97–117, available at <*http://interoperability.ucsd.edu/docs/07BowkerBaker_InfraStudies.pdf*>, accessed 10 June 2013.
3. Joanne Evans, Sue McKemmish and Barbara Reed, 'Making Metadata Matter: OutcomesFrom the Clever Recordkeeping Metadata Project', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 37, no. 1, May 2009, pp. 28–56.
4. Frank Upward et al., 'Recordkeeping Informatics: Re-Figuring a Discipline in Crisis With a Single Minded Approach', *Records Management Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1, March 2013, pp. 37–50, doi:10.1108/09565691311325013.
5. Barbara Reed, 'Metadata: A Contestable Concept?', presented at the Paradigm Shift, a seminar in honour of Hans Hofman, National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague, Recordkeeping Roundtable, 2014, available at <*http://rkroundtable.org/2014/02/05/metadata-a-contestable-concept/*>, accessed 22 February 2014.