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Full docs or it didn't happen

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'Full docs or it didn't happen' was WikiLeaks' variation on the 'pics or it didn't happen' Internet meme. It highlights the importance of public access to full source documents for journalists and other researchers.

In the issues paper 'Access', developed after the Recordkeeping Roundtable workshop 'Reinventing Archival Methods',[1] Roundtable co-founder Barbara Reed described the information and technology landscape that we live in as characterised by '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)'. She went on to ask: 'This is the early technology realisation of Derrida's "all is archive" – what is our professional response?'

A theme in both of the Recordkeeping Roundtable's recent issues papers on Access and Appraisal was breaking through boundaries. Perhaps one of the most challenging of these for many recordkeeping professionals to consider is the evolving form of the archive. Non-government and community archives are not new, nor are collecting archives, however the evolution of the Web and in particular the rise of transparency-based initiatives mean that we are seeing a greater number of independent actors and organisations such as journalists, publishers and activists keeping *their* 'primary sources' online. If their structures and processes do not fit with accepted norms of archival theory and practice, should we not consider them 'real' archives? Can they be trusted? What, if anything, do we have to offer these projects? Is there a point to considering sites like these from a recordkeeping perspective?

I started to investigate some of these questions in a paper I gave at the ICA Congress in Brisbane in 2012: 'People, Records and Power: What Archives Can Learn From WikiLeaks'.[2] In that paper I looked at appraisal, authenticity and access as points of comparison, and I think these three remain useful as jumping-off points.

Appraisal

People working on transparency projects such as Detention Logs[3] are doing appraisal. They consider the need for evidence for a given purpose (tracking incidents in Australia's

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detention network), for a given community or communities (journalists, the wider community) and put in place mechanisms to ensure that it is kept. The team that quickly built and deployed Yanukovych Leaks site[4] did so as part of a journalistic effort to share, analyse and report on documents recovered from the departing president's estate amidst the chaos of the unrest in Ukraine. In a recent online discussion I engaged in on whether projects like these fell into our domain,[5] it was put to me that the records they keep are not 'theirs', are not 'original'. My response to this is where there is a business activity or process, and a requirement for evidence, the question of the provenance of a record that takes part in the business is important but does not affect its 'recordness' in its new environment; particularly in the digital world in which records re-use is a natural part of business. Appraisal is a recurrent process, and not just along the axis of a single government 'owner' of the records. Records are, to use Sue McKemmish's phrasing, 'always in the process of becoming'.[6] As they move through new contexts and uses, they accrue additional layers of meaning and in each recordkeeping system they become a new record.

Authenticity

In considering the question of authenticity in relation to WikiLeaks, I found that our profession's carefully crafted criteria for testing and maintaining authenticity in the digital world, born of new interpretations of chains of custody and provenance, and implemented with metadata, did not seem to be so necessary when there was automatic widespread acceptance of the authenticity of records presented, which came without any such documentation. In the case of transparency projects perhaps the test is more about the business model; if you publish bogus documents you have no more credibility. Where the 'original' record remains in a Department of Immigration and Border Protection recordkeeping system, or in the files of the department's freedom of information officer, the project's claims can be easily refuted by a comparison. If you are making yourself unpopular with government agencies or nation states by publishing classified records, any evidence that records are not authentic will quickly be unearthed. So where recordkeeping has higher stakes, the equation for testing authenticity changes. Perhaps a site purporting to have the personal letters of a long-dead minor poet could get away with more. However there are, of course, tools and practices that we use in recordkeeping that could be brought to these initiatives to support provenance and therefore the trustworthiness of the records kept by these projects.

Access

In the case of transparency projects, full and open access to records is generally a given. This stands in powerful contrast to the long periods of closure that those of us working in government are generally faced with, and is greatly energising. WikiLeaks now offers a powerful, Google-style search across 20 record sets comprising millions of individual records in full text, as well as a range of advanced search options.[7] Enviable to any archive worth its salt. But what about the bigger picture? If we are serious about our role as guides to the rich and changing contexts in which records are made and kept, to enable understanding of the bigger documentary universe, how can we provide more?

In 2005, in his introductory exploration of the idea of parallel provenance, Chris Hurley said:

An authentic context, it might be allowed, is an entity observably involved in the process, business or activity with which the records are connected in a view that makes them evidence. Thus, the context of the records of Australia's Stolen Generation is to be found in the official agencies of the government, in the churches and welfare agencies that participated, and in the people to whom that policy was applied.[8]

Similarly, if we consider Detention Logs' ambience, tracking and investigating incidents in detention facilities may be seen as part of the broader context of Australia's asylum seeker policy through asylum seekers' stories, government records, the records of advocates and NGOs supporting refugees and in the work of journalists researching and reporting on the policy's implementation. Archivists are not in the business of making up context; we identify and document it. Where, then, is the work being done to document these contexts, in ways that enable relationships between these records to shine – in the form of advice on building recordkeeping systems for immediate purposes and providing meta-context? If not us, who?

Big change generally needs to start with a few small steps. 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. Those small steps might be finding out about transparency projects and the many ways people are keeping and sharing records as evidence online; using social media and online forums to ask questions; understanding the technologies they are using; maybe even learning some of these yourself. By understanding and engaging with projects such as these, our profession has a chance to step beyond managing dead, closed records, and into recordkeeping that can have real and immediate effects in society. It is an opportunity we must not ignore.

Endnotes

1. Barbara Reed, 'Access', September 2013, available at <*http://rkroundtable.org/2013/09/28/reinventing-archival-methods-issues-papers/*>, accessed March 2014.
2. Cassie Findlay, 'People, Records and Power: What Archives Can Learn From WikiLeaks', paper presented at the 2012 Brisbane ICA Congress, available at <*http://ica2012.ica.org/files/pdf/Full%20papers%20upload/ica12Final00220.pdf*>, accessed March 2014.
3. Detention Logs describes its purpose as follows: 'We publish data, documents and investigations that reveal new perspectives on conditions and events inside immigration detention. Detention Logs supports deeper community knowledge of and accountability for conditions in Australia's immigration detention network', available at <*http://www.detentionlogs.com.au/*>, accessed March 2014.
4. Yanukovych Leaks (<*http://yanukovychleaks.org/*>, accessed March 2014) was launched in February 2014 by a coalition of journalists and activists with the aim of putting scans of documents found left behind at the estate of former Ukrainian president Victor Yanukovych online.
5. See comments on 'Approaching Principles for Independent Archives' at <*http://equivalentideas.com/journal/approaching-principles-for-independent-archives/*>, accessed March 2014.
6. Sue McKemmish, 'Are Records Ever Actual?', 1998, available at <*http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/smcktrc.html*>, accessed March 2014.
7. WikiLeaks Search, <*https://search.wikileaks.org/*>, accessed March 2014.
8. Chris Hurley, 'Parallel Provenance (If These Are Your Records, Where Are Your Stories?)', 2005, available at <*http://www.descriptionguy.com/images/WEBSITE/parallel-provenance.pdf*>, accessed March 2014.