

People telling stories

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There are stories that take seven days to tell... there are other stories that take you all your life... The truth about stories is that that's all we are. (Thomas King)¹

In the late-1980s and early-1990s, some amazing things happened in archives and records theory. Confronted by the rise of electronic records and a challenge to re-imagine accepted models, some clever people did just that.

But I do not think even those re-imaginings could have foreseen the shape and speed of developments from electronic office documents and early websites to our mobile, ever-connected and soon-to-be augmented reality, with millions of people creating and consuming content in unimaginable variety and quantity.

An *information revolution* spawned the *information society*, which in turn fuels the *information economy*.

Amid this massive generation, use, re-use and re-purposing of content, the perceived value of information (and of records) has changed dramatically.

The paradigm shift has been from a world where information is scarce, to one of abundance and overload. We are incredibly reliant on information and records for virtually everything in our lives. And yet there is so much that individual pieces can seem almost worthless, disposable.

In the current environment, it is the 'informational' quality of records which is arguably more highly prized than their 'evidential' quality.

And yet, whether you're in court, proving compliance to a regulator or researching family history, whether evidence or information, records help people tell stories about the things they have done.

Focusing on this human dimension is the key to understanding the role of archives and records professionals in the world of digital information, demonstrating value and adapting our processes as required.

Three areas where we might reconsider traditional approaches are briefly outlined below:

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- (1) information literacy – helping people manage their digital lives and legacy;
- (2) scalable strategies – understanding how people interact with systems;
- (3) depth and distance – helping people make sense of the digital universe.

Information literacy

Since people first began documenting their thoughts and activity, the tools for recording and mass communication have grown steadily more sophisticated and increasingly accessible.

Today, much of the world's population have the ability and opportunity to record experiences and exchange ideas with others across the planet. They are also ever more aware that others can and do keep records of or about them.

As individuals create more of their own records, and are given a greater say in records about them (created by other entities), so too they are facing more responsibilities. These records and information are more often subject to legislative controls than was the case in the paper world, especially if they are stored by a third party such as an Internet service provider.

People often complain about information overload, feeling overwhelmed by large and unmanageable volumes of information. They are increasingly conscious of the potential value of their information and seek to control it more effectively. In the digital age, everyone needs the skills to find, use, manage and protect information, in order to live and work.²

Why not share our skills?

According to Foucault,³ 'There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude... Rather, we must multiply the paths and the possibilities of coming and goings.'

Teaching information literacy to help individuals manage their own records would raise awareness about the benefits of recordkeeping processes. It is an opportunity to establish our role, to tell a different story about archives and records professionals. Skills, knowledge and better practices may also transfer into corporate environments.

Archivists, especially those handling collections and personal records, can contribute to the development of information literacy in the general public. There may also be opportunities to augment existing programs in schools and public libraries. In corporate settings, information literacy could be a core component of staff induction programs.

Useful skills and knowledge might include:

- how to search and retrieve information in a variety of scenarios;
- how to evaluate the accuracy and quality of information sources;
- basic metadata to make your records more searchable and useful;
- good practices for the use of email and social media, including capturing records, migrating and de-activating accounts;
- access rights, privacy and security settings;
- understanding common contractual provisions from service providers;
- how to manage information as an asset – including things to consider in estate planning and your will;
- simple backup and recovery practices;
- how to appraise and dispose of information, and why you might want to.

Providing information literacy training can help us understand how and why individuals of the digital age create, keep and use records in the first and second dimensions of the continuum. This understanding will help archives and records professionals develop better appraisal and access strategies for organisations and communities in the third and fourth dimensions.

Scalable strategies

As information becomes more democratised, more diffuse, the concept of centralised control or compliance is impractical. We can influence people towards better practices, as described above. But in general, processes that rely on individuals to take point-in-time actions on individual record objects are unreliable at best.

Bearman⁴ wrote about the volume, fragility and complexity of contemporary archival records. In the age of Big Data, we are using capital ‘Vs’ to describe Volume, Velocity and Variety. New ‘Vs’ are being added almost daily, to now include volatility (more apt than fragility), visualisation and veracity or validity.

There is just too much complicated stuff at the record, series or even process levels for traditional approaches to appraisal, access and preservation. We need Big Archives.

Big Archives manage *whole systems*.

No more random sampling or attempts to define objective criteria that predict cases of ‘significance’. We have the power to take them all.

Appraisal of systems would enable massive, ongoing disposal and selection processes – destroy more, but also keep more, and keep it in context. The US Library of Congress decision to archive Twitter provides an example. It is not necessary to wait until the system or data becomes inactive. Real-time feeds and updates to the archived system can allow continuous business-driven data purging to maintain performance in the ‘live’ system.

System-level access could make an entire PC environment (from the days of the 386) available in a window of a modern-day PC, owing to increases in computing power.⁵ This kind of approach would have significant benefits for both evidence and memory.

Archivists could make greater use of existing technologies and services to significantly scale up storage, indexing, de-duplication and search capability.

Preservation strategies might look towards maintaining systems in online environments, to escape the challenges of evolving hardware, and leverage services for ongoing software conversion, update and patching.

Understanding and describing systems is not new for archivists. There are, however, many more systems than there have ever been before. Analysing, maintaining or building relationships between systems would also be critical for both appraisal and access. There are certainly some metadata challenges to examine in this space, but this is the level we should focus attention on.

Systems are made up of technology, policies, processes and, of course, people. The way people interact with systems is the key factor for access and appraisal decisions in the world of Big Archives.

Depth and distance

Big Archives can tell bigger stories, more stories, parallel stories and stories of many layers.

They are places where people can contribute to archival processes. For example, votes ('was this useful?') could play a role in the development of access and appraisal policies. This presents a significant opportunity to more fully recognise the role of 'pluralising' and to dynamically integrate community expectations into archival processes.

Building on Hurley's examinations of parallel provenance,⁶ and research in related disciplines,⁷ new approaches could capture multiple and diverse perspectives on stories – both old and new.

Opportunities to engage the broader community in archival description projects are already being actively explored, along with individual decisions about the retention or disposal of personal records (such as census forms). There is scope for greater development in this area.

All of these are ways in which archival methods can place an ever-expanding digital universe in a collective or social context. There are other interesting discussions in the popular media about what it means to be human in a world so dominated by digital information and technology. These are concerns arising in the fourth dimension where archivists may be able to add value.

Some topics that deserve greater analysis than is possible in this brief article include:

- making sense of time in the digital age,⁸ where information past and present sits side by side;⁹
- exploring the use of spatial data to enable location-specific access to archival content¹⁰ – on your smartphone or Google Glass;
- finding distance, disconnection and space for reflection or analysis¹¹ – possibly the benefits of retaining a non-virtual (physical) place for research.

Archival methods have the capacity to add depth and distance,¹² helping people navigate and feel human, within the digital universe.

Conclusion

At a time when archives and records knowledge would seem to be indispensable, we find our methods may not be fit for purpose.

From creation to appraisal and access, the keeping of records is all about people. Technology can enable multiple and multifaceted stories to be told.

Our role is not so much to 'manage the crowd'¹³ but to help people, organisations and communities manage life (and tell their stories) within the crowd.

Focusing on the human dimension will help us re-imagine recordkeeping for the digital age.

Endnotes

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