

Broadening the record and expanding the archives

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The concept of ‘the record’ is core archival theory and archival methods. In looking at reinventing archival methods, we must ask whether the traditional notion of the record is still applicable and how the record connects and links with material not considered part of the record. Definitions and conceptualisations of what a record is tend to be very broad, but I suggest that for many or most archives, the concept of what a record is – and therefore how records are collected, managed and accessed – is narrower. In examining how archival methods are to be reinvented, I suggest that a broad approach be taken and records of all types be considered.

In terms of displaying and providing access to records, as Barbara Reed recently highlighted,¹ the emphasis in archives has been on the record-as-document or ‘record object’, rather than considering the transaction which created the record. Often this emphasis is appropriate, although the transactional aspect of the records is then at best obscured, or, more likely, ignored altogether. However, when dealing with born-digital material and non-traditional records, the lack of attention to the transaction becomes particularly problematic.

Born-digital records may be data in business systems or a line in a database – possibly with little or no metadata attached to that individual line and probably not stored in an electronic document and records management system (EDRMS).² Often, the entire business system provides the context for the transaction, and thus individual data cannot – and should not – be separated out. How to access and display this material is a critical question as more and more records are kept and managed within business systems.

In the case of non-traditional records, a representation of the record may be the only way to provide access to it.³ While access to records is always a mediated experience, dealing only with representations adds an additional level of complexity when determining how best to provide access. This complexity should be made explicit in all descriptions of the material and the role of the creator of the representation acknowledged. Creating a representation often requires taking a photo or making a drawing of the record, leading to an additional layer of interpretation and editorialising.

Archivists, on the whole, are clear on an epistemological level that records are much more than just ‘traditional paper files’. However, this understanding is not reflected in the cataloguing systems that we use, where the record object is privileged. Any reassessment or reinvention of archival methods needs to take into account the

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archival systems available and the assumptions built into those systems. For digital material, the work done both by archivists and others in the area of emulation points to potential methods to present this material and may offer alternatives to the traditional EDRMS model.

Archivists also have to manage and provide access to non-record material, often doubling as museologists in small archives. This compounds the difficulty of using systems which privilege the record object. In this situation, the ability to create and provide links between records and non-records is of supreme importance. Movements and methods such as Linked Open Data are critical in ensuring that such linking can happen on a large scale, including between organisations and collections. With a broader and more flexible definition of what a record is, these methods become powerful tools to present a rich and variegated canvas.

Utilising a broad definition of what records are (or could be) also opens up the possibility of using our tools and frameworks for managing material not in our archives' custody. While this possibility has been widely discussed, there are few archives which have put this into practice. Forty years ago, Peter Scott argued that his system of documenting records and their relationships could be used for material not within the archives' custody.⁴ Twenty years ago, Terry Cook suggested that to survive, archivists needed to embrace both postmodernism and post-custodialism.⁵ I suggest that this shift – in the thinking required and the concrete practices – has still not occurred even though today it is needed more than ever.

A post-custodialist model may be easier to implement in archives which are part of the agencies whose records they keep (such as universities or religious archives) than in those archives (such as state government and national archives) which are separate from the organisations whose records they hold. It may be easier to consider post-custodialism when only one organisation is involved and its functions are relatively contained. In many cases, resourcing issues in smaller archives mean the archivist is involved in records management activities too, so the distance between records creators and the archivist is shorter. Then archivists could be involved earlier in implementations of aspects of post-custodialism and be able to demonstrate their worth to the organisation in a meaningful way. As Peter Scott notes, it is important for archivists to be involved in documenting an agency's recordkeeping systems, functions and activities while these are still happening, rather than waiting until the material is transferred to the archives.⁶

For example, at Victoria University, we have mapped out all potential record-creating entities from VU and its predecessor institutions. This exercise has provided a much more expansive view of provenance than only documenting the creators of records in the archives and has made documenting relationships between entities both easier and more useful. At the organisation level, this work has allowed archives staff to engage more broadly with the university community and to provide useful information about structures and relationships over time. These activities have led to a greater understanding not only of the importance of the university archives but also of the value of the work done by archivists well before consideration of transferring material to the archives.

Therefore, in looking at reinventing archival methods, I would suggest that we need both to look back and remind ourselves of the key concepts that underpin our theoretical and professional work, and to look forward to the opportunities that await us in the digital and post-custodial world. We need to examine the theories and concepts themselves, rather than assuming our current implementation models are the only ones possible.⁷ We especially need to remind ourselves of what a record actually may be instead of only considering the more conventional types of records. Finally I would

suggest that a general relaxing of boundaries is needed – not only in terms of how we approach managing and linking records and non-records, but also in how we respond to other people, organisations and professions who may be working on allied issues. Being more open to working with others will encourage a perception of archivists as relevant and useful partners, which in turn offers us more opportunities to provide access to the material we manage – which must always be our goal.

Endnotes

1. Barbara Reed, 'Metadata: A Contestable Concept?', available at <<http://rkroundtable.org/2014/02/05/metadata-a-contestable-concept/#more-813>>, accessed 18 February 2014.
2. See for example James Lappin, 'Why NARA Has No Option But to Preserve Significant Email Accounts', August 2013, available at <<http://thinkingrecords.co.uk/2013/08/30/why-nara-has-no-option-but-to-preserve-significant-e-mail-accounts/>> accessed 20 February 2014, in Kate Cumming and Cassie Findlay, 'Appraisal, Shifting the Paradigm', presented at Archives: The Future, 2013 Australian Society of Archivists conference, Canberra, 16 October 2013, available at <http://www.archivists.org.au/icms_docs/172525_Kate_Cumming_Cassie_Findlay.pdf>, accessed 20 February 2014.
3. Examples include primarily visual or experiential media such as tattoos, public signage and advertisements.
4. Peter J Scott, 'Facing the Reality of Administrative Change – Some Further Remarks on the Record Group Concept', in *The Arrangement and Description of Archives Amid Administrative and Technological Change: Essays and Reflections By and About Peter J. Scott*, Adrian Cunningham (ed.), Australian Society of Archivists, Sydney South, 2010, pp. 111–18.
5. Terry Cook, 'Electronic Records, Paper Minds', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 22, no. 2, November 1994, pp. 300–28.
6. Peter J Scott, 'The Record Group Concept', letter to the editor of *The American Archivist*, vol. 30, no. 3, July 1967, pp. 541–52, reprinted in Cunningham, pp. 109–10.
7. See for example Barbara Reed's discussion about the variations in how the series system has been implemented: Barbara Reed, 'The Australian Context Relationship (CRS or Series) System: An Appreciation', in Cunningham, pp. 346–73.