

Chris Hurley's stuff [website], by Chris Hurley, <http://www.descriptionguy.com/>

Chris Hurley's Stuff (<http://www.descriptionguy.com/>) provides a straightforward and deeply informative web presence to Hurley's archival journey over the past four decades. A prolific author of international reputation, Hurley has divided his site into five key sections ('Home', 'About Me', 'Legal & Governance', 'Description' and 'Not Otherwise Classified'), the core of which comprises an impressive assemblage of published and unpublished work, which is full of insightful commentary and analysis, as well as biting critiques of various colleagues and the profession as a whole. It can make for riveting reading getting the background story and Hurley's interpretation of several of the archival controversies that he has been enmeshed in.

Beyond the formal, professional texts, the 'About Me' section provides the reader with an extensive 8000-plus word autobiography, which focuses primarily on Hurley's archival journey. Strewn with contestation, conflict, internecine battles and evidence of censorship and professional society marginalisation, this text is also peppered with wry humour, some humility and warm regard for influential mentors that Hurley feels particularly indebted to. Overall, it provides a thoughtful window into understanding Hurley, both as a human being and as an archivist focusing on accountability and description. Throughout the site, one is reminded that, indeed, the personal is political.

A childhood spent in 'complete solitude' is conjectured with provisioning Hurley with a still-evident 'self-reliance and an indifference to the opinions of others'. These early traits appear to have prepared him well for a professional life where more than once he was sent away or ignored for being difficult to manage. Frustrated during an early career stint at the National Library of Australia, Hurley joined the Commonwealth Archives Office (the precursor to the National Archives of Australia) in 1971. The switch over to archives was initially kind, providing him with the great fortune of landing within the orbit of Peter J Scott in the centre of Scott's revolutionary series system's documentation of agency context in archival descriptive systems. Early on, Hurley also witnessed first-hand the bizarre reactions and recalcitrance of agencies to the introduction of the 30-year access rule and archives' attempts to wrestle control.

This charmed early career continued onwards and upwards with well-funded overseas study in the United Kingdom (UK). Over time, Hurley obtained substantial experience drafting archives legislation and then waiting for it to be enacted. Waiting for something to happen is a theme running throughout Hurley's career, as is the perception of not being adequately utilised. The second half of a nearly two-decade-long stint (1981–1997) with the Public Records Office of Victoria ended very poorly for Hurley. In 1990, he was transferred from the role of Keeper of Public Records to a newly created non-job as Chief Archivist, apparently resulting from dust-ups over unauthorised agency destruction of records. As if in a time machine, Hurley was transported back to his student days spent in the UK. He was provided with a state salary, an office and all the time in the world to write. He took tremendous advantage of this odd situation, the evidence of which can be pored over on his website. In the late 1990s, Hurley switched over to a series of high-level positions, including Acting National Archivist at Archives New Zealand. However, peace did not reign here for Hurley either during his six-year employment. His narrative of this time reads as alternately frustrated, bemused and infuriated, particularly by the absurd governmental exercise of valuating the archives in monetary terms as a national 'asset'. Over the past decade, Hurley has moved on to the private sector, making a quite positive-sounding

run as Manager of the Commonwealth Bank Archives. He is currently moving towards formal retirement.

The 'Legal & Governance' section provides a listing with explanatory texts for thirteen compositions over the period 1994–2005. These range from book chapters to published articles to conference presentations. Of the thirteen, eleven are available, while two are embargoed as a result of copyright, including the chapter that he wrote for the book *Archives and the Public Good*, which I coedited with Richard J Cox. Three post-scripts (updates and revisitings) are also included, which detail critical developments in Hurley's thinking and advocacy, which had been expressed earlier in associated pieces. The majority of this section is dedicated to the accountability dimension of archives and archivists (ethics, navigating political pressure and democratic governance). It also includes convincing charges against the parent body of this journal, tantamount to the suppression of intellectual freedom. Over time, these writings demonstrate Hurley's positive efforts to become more systematic, rigorous and explicit in articulating professional behavioural standards and their enforcement, despite his overall conclusion that they are woefully inadequate and ineffective.

The most powerful thread that runs through this section is Hurley's troubled and disturbing analyses of the Heiner Affair and the inability of both the Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities (CAARA) and the Australian Society of Archivists to grapple with the profound accountability issues that were attendant. Hurley makes a convincing case that both bodies were more interested in misapplied self-preservation, as opposed to honestly and openly dealing with a child abuse – including sexual abuse – scandal of substantial magnitude, which led right to the archival doorstep. To Hurley, Heiner directly implicated, via a clearly improper disposal action, the much-heralded accountability dimension to archives. To Hurley's dismay, however, it became clear that archival interest in accountability was easier to opine about if the target of a records-based accountability failure lay outside the profession. Hurley makes a very convincing case that once the accountability target became the archives itself, the profession's vaunted accountability rhetoric fell flat. To Hurley, the profession 'equivocated, ducked for cover, and refused to act. To say it was a revelation is an understatement. Gradually I lost respect and regard for my chosen profession. By the time it all played out, I had become terminally disillusioned'. After reading through several of Hurley's writings on this matter, I find it hard to disagree.

The 'Description' section provides a listing with explanatory text for 24 pieces of writing for the period 1977–2012, with about half appearing after the date (circa 2004–2005) when the 'Legal & Governance' content tapers off and when Hurley makes the move to online self-publishing, bypassing disciplinary peer-reviewed journals. Of these 24, all except three are available as full text. The missing items include two early pieces and one broken link ('Documenting for Dummies', 2008, which is also unavailable in the 'Archived' version of this website, harvested and captured by the *Internet Archive* during February 2013 at: http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://descriptionguy.com/).

This section is rich in content and elaboration of the transformations, both theoretical and practical, that were undertaken and advocated by Hurley, as he confronted the limitations of descriptive standards under development in the wider international sphere. It highlights his affinity for the mind-altering critiques offered by David Bearman of the shortcomings of normative descriptive practices, especially in light of the advancing and increasingly pervasive presence of electronic records. These threads intertwined to forcefully critique and replace the shortcomings of the traditional linear unidimensional

description of things and creators into static finding aids. In its place, there was an effort to initiate a more process and integrated view of documentation, which takes its cue from the Records Continuum model, with its focus on multidimensionality, contextual diversity and accretions across time, 'simultaneous multiple' and parallel provenance, as well as the promise of new forms of recordkeeping metadata to enhance evidence, historicity and discovery. Hurley pays special homage to the ideas that Bearman introduced in his visits to Australia over 20 years ago and how they both shaped and prodded Hurley's decades-long efforts to '[regulate] descriptive activity in order to support meaning and discovery'. To service these ideals and desired outcomes, this section of the website documents Hurley's grappling with some of the most substantial challenges facing the profession, vis-a-vis documenting complex relationships within, and between, records and the entities that they intersect with across their existence: metadata, electronic recordkeeping, data re-use and custodialism. His most recent offering meditates on the struggle facing the profession, as it strives to make its content more visible, accessible and retrievable in the heterogeneous Internet ecosystem of search engines to which most users first turn.

Finally, the 'Not Otherwise Classified' section is akin to what, in the United States, we would call the 'Miscellaneous' folder. The six pieces for the period 1994–2004 tackle issues such as records management and the evolving information environment, business archives, the debate over whether the 'evidence' turn in electronic records management excludes the interests of collecting and personal manuscript archivists and the larger management framework records professionals need to understand in order to thrive. While these contributions to the website do not fit well with the other two sections, relegating them to a miscellaneous folder makes them easy to miss – an easy error for the reader to make.

Overall, this is a great place to immerse oneself and get lost, as one click easily leads to another. Some modest suggestions for improvement would include a blog that replicates the frequently long and incisive professional critiques and comments that Hurley irregularly posts to the Archives and Records Australia listserv, the opening up of a 'Comments' section and better integration of the content from Hurley's Google group discussion forum: recordkeeping@googlegroups.com. Finally, some better guidance on the 'Quick Contact' dialogue box in the lower right-hand corner of the home page could likely enhance visitor interaction.

On a deeper, more macro-professional level, this site represents a welcome development in the dissemination and availability of professional literature. Several of our key professional journals are now owned by large publishing conglomerates, whose online pricing structures cordon off access to many professionals, who would benefit greatly from access. Unless one is in a large institutional setting, such as a university, access via the extant pay-per-article-viewed model is exorbitant and, more than likely, distances the current literature and ideas from many involved in our profession. Hurley could have easily published a volume of collected essays, instead of creating this site. I, for one, hope that many of our prolific colleagues will take note of this site and follow its lead. The downstream problem of federating this multi-site content via search and retrieval would be a good problem to have.

David A Wallace
University of Michigan

© 2013, David A Wallace

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2013.799426>