ARCHIVIST — KEEPER, UNDERTAKER OR AUDITOR

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This article is essentially the paper given to the "Keeping Data" Seminar, sponsored jointly by the Australian Society of Archivists and the Australian Council of Archives, in Sydney in October 1990. The author was asked to present a paper for the closing session of the Seminar, a panel discussion focusing on the challenges posed by electronic records to traditional archival theory and practice.

The paper advances the view that the challenge to change exists for archivists as they enter the 1990s irrespective of the advances of computer technology and its effect on record-keeping processes. It urges archivists to clearly define their special professional skills and market them appropriately in today's resource competitive environment. It redefines the archival role within a traditional theoretical framework and provides a core mission for the profession with new-age appraisal strategies essential for an information management environment.

The last decade has seen the establishment of many new archival programs in a variety of institutions and corporations throughout Australia. It has been a time of consolidation for the archival profession in this country; we have examined and debated the role and image of the profession (now officially recorded as a distinct profession by the Australian Bureau of Statistics[1]); we have tried to come to grips with the rapid advances of technological change and with the new-age idol "information management". We are at a crossroads and we have the dilemma of choosing the path to follow — to success, to convergence and integration, or to oblivion.

For an in-house or corporate archivist in the 1980s trying to establish archival programs for the first time in the increasingly resource diminished tertiary education sector, the primary challenge has been the adaptation, presentation and marketing of traditional archival theory and practice in cost-benefit efficiency terms. In my experience,

archival piety and the cultural or heritage type approaches have little lasting impact on senior executives even despite the historical euphoria surrounding bicentennial and jubilee celebrations. The marketing of the link with an institutional efficiency and cost-benefit analysis provides the orientation for effective linkage with the strategic planning being undertaken by most corporations in recent years. Strategic plans invariably feature information resource planning as an integral part. Traditional archival theory stresses the *evidential* rather than *informational* value of archives but this is not to say that information resource management, which is primarily about *data* and then *information*, cannot be adapted to incorporate traditional archival theory. And this is the challenge — to adapt information resource management (IRM) planning to include the essence of archival theory.

At this point it seems appropriate for me to state that I am fundamentally a Jenkinsonian and a follower of the "CRS" sect as developed by Scott *et al.* In simple terms the primary archival responsibilities are the physical and moral defence of the records and the two basic principles of archival operation are origin (i.e. provenance) and original order. This is the traditional approach in which archivists are primarily *keepers*, preserving records for posterity. It is my view that the challenges to adapt and change posed to traditional archival theory and practice exist in the modern corporate environment irrespective of the threat of computer technology. There is some strong evidence to suggest that the paper flow in offices has increased rather than decreased with the advent of this technology[2] and the archivist of the 1990s needs to be a proactive operator with clearly developed concepts of mission and goals within the overall corporate operation. We need to publicly redefine our perceived role as keepers. There are some shifts in emphasis and in thought processes necessary, but these are as much resultant from the maturation of the profession as they are from the influence of an external force such as the technological change.

Appraisal is the essential pivot of archival activity, not arrangement and description as is so often portrayed. Traditionally, appraisal has been undertaken when the records have ceased to have current administrative use, as an end-process in the records life-cycle. Often administrative decisions have resulted in "purges" of the records prior to accredited appraisal. The archivist is then called upon as the *undertaker*. Frequently the administrator no longer wishes to be concerned with the records. They are sent to the archivist or the archivist is invited to take away whatever is chosen. It is a passive role, an accepting role. Do what you want with the bodies they no longer have any currency. Appraisal may result but it is essentially only a matter for the archivist's conscience. Physical defence first, moral

defence second. This is the archivist's role in the traditional life-cycle of records approach. The archivist is the *undertaker* who then acts as *keeper* for selected "permanent" material, the selection often being de facto as well as archival.

Questions must be asked, however, about the validity of this approach in the modern environment. I have for some years been an advocate of the primacy of intellectual control in the archival operation. The essential element of archival intellectual control is appraisal but it is appraisal with a difference, enhanced by the totality of the archival role which the corporate archivist uniquely can fulfil.

The major question, however, is this: what are the traditional and special skills of the archivist that we can market in today's resource competitive environment? Let me first begin by assessing whether the management of current records is simply the first stage in archival methodology or whether the archival concern, fundamentally the requirement to preserve permanently valuable records, is merely the final step in a comprehensive records management process.[3] I have no doubts that the former is the case, that archival science provides the pivot for efficient and effective management of the continuum of the records of an organisation. To favour the latter approach misunderstands the very nature of archival science. And just as the split between the records management and archival phases of record keeping is no longer an acceptable alternative, it is no longer sufficient to exclude archivists from an active role in the processes of data or information management. To preserve the continuum the archivist needs to be involved in the ongoing management of recorded information, regardless of the storage medium.

An adaptation of the traditional life-cycle management concepts for records promotes a sense of order and a systematic approach to the overall management of recorded information.[4] Archival theory produces intellectual strategies and solutions to records control issues, based on the primary concepts of function and form, not on content analysis.[5] Archival theory has resulted in an approach to record systems aptly described by American David Bearman as a "context-based anthropological approach".[6] Archivists have a tried and tested analytical approach which is technologically independent.[7]

What should the modern approach to appraisal be? Should archivists "select for permanent retention" as we all have been schooled, or "appraise and eliminate" with a shift in axis to the determination of *continuing*, rather than *permanent*, value. To the corporate archivist frequently falls the responsibility for determining *continuing value* because of the direct and integrated relationship that exists with the creators and major users of the records and because they may subsequently be expected to conjure up information or evidence required by their organisation on request, irrespective of physical

custody or even time lapse. Continuing value replaces permanent value in the modern record environment.

The strength of an integrated corporate archival appraisal program based on continuing value is that it combines systems analysis with cost-benefit efficiency. Records first and foremost are created to support primary business functions.[8] Archival appraisal injects the element of evidential assessment into the process before it is too late, at an active rather than post-active level. It provides planning where previously there has been chance. There is a shift in thinking here. An undertaker is not what is required — the records are still active. It is a simple transition to see the archivist with intellectual control over the spectrum of records of the organisation in the role of auditor of record systems for evidence.

The volatility of data in computerised record systems together with the nature and dematerialisation of electronic records logically requires the injection of the continuing value archival appraisal methodology at an early stage in processes. Traditional records management experts have rarely been consulted in the development and implementation of electronic record systems, with the emphasis in these systems being placed on the electronic capabilities of the manipulation of the data, rather than sound records systems principles or an understanding or overview of record keeping requirements. Information in current computer systems is generally treated as data without any concern for, or understanding of, any evidential requirements of such information for successful business operations. All too often information in computer systems is treated as a relatively isolated entity rather than an integrated part of the organisation's total record resources.

The use of the traditional theories of archival science and records management principles integrated with computer systems design and management will lead to vast improvement in the quality and success of computer systems applications. Traditional life-cycle stages cannot be readily separated in many computer records and reliance upon the undertaker archivist role would have disastrous consequences for current administrations and for the continuum of records.

So it is not so much the revision of archival theory or strategies that is required before they can be applied to electronic records but rather an adequate understanding and acceptance of the archival mission together with the timing of the new-age appraisal that is the essence. But how successfully can this be integrated into the information resource management component of strategic planning and into business operations? Can archivists, who have been consistently viewed as a profession involved in the down-stream activity, be accepted as an essential player in the front-end planning of information resource management.[9] It would seem a logical

progression for a group, whose mission is the identification and preservation of records of continuing value to an organisation, to be given a key role in the front-end planning of information value analysis. Is the archivist then responsible not only for the corporate memory of the organisation but also for the potential corporate memory? Is it any one profession's responsibility in today's administrations to facilitate the recording of the *evidential* as well as *informational* aspects of business transactions? Is the era of *designer archives* fast approaching? Should the archivist become a shaper of the information and of information systems?[10]

The archivist as systems designer and the shaper of information could be viewed by some as "the tail wagging the dog". Views that such an approach would inevitably lead to artificial memories being created and self-conscious record-keeping corrupting natural order and integrity no doubt abound among many who see themselves as traditionalists, as *keepers*. This may be particularly true of those whose experience has been acquired in the custodial archival institutions.

As a traditionalist and a Jenkinsonian I have no theoretical or intellectual difficulty with the corporate archivist playing an upstream role as one of a team of specialists responsible for designing and implementing new record systems, be they paper or electronically based. To me this is, in fact, a logical progression of Jenkinson's views on the role of the archivist. With electronic records it requires shifting the order to place moral defence ahead of physical defence. I have run an archival operation for several years without physical custody over certain key paper based records series over which I have intellectual control. It is a natural progression to extend this strategy of intellectual control over records to those created by other media. Pragmatism and archival theory make good companions. The pragmatic role for the archivist in the developing IRM environment is that of a watchdog, a regulator and an assessor of the continuing evidence requirements of an organisation. The archivist has the role of auditor.

I would now like to briefly switch to control mechanisms, to the other major area of archival concern — arrangement and description. I mentioned earlier the dematerialised nature of electronic records and this makes them more difficult for the archivist to come to grips with. The two essential archival principles of origin and original order need to be examined in relation to electronic records. As an advocate to the series system of arrangement and control I have no particular difficulties with multiple or variable provenance which may be presented in computer record systems. This has been a consistent problem area raised in North American archival literature in recent years and it appears to confuse some archivists in this country as well.

For those with a working familiarity with the CRS system, multiple provenance series are easily catered for as a simple matter of

intellectual control over the administrative and record-keeping processes. Indeed catering for variable or multiple-provenance was the essential shift in axis which resulted in the development of series system from the record group system. Ian Maclean recently described it thus: "The Scott solution was in a sense to vary the priority for origin and to emphasise original order; and then to pay tribute by indexing to the creating department."[11]

It is, however, in the area of original order, in the area of integrity of the records that the theory becomes more difficult. Electronic records are a *virtual* rather than a *physical* entity. The concept of intrinsic value is somewhat muddied. Electronic records have a function and form (or more correctly functions and forms) that can be determined but new techniques, adapted for the particular media, must be developed to describe these features.

I expect that the series system of arrangement and control can cater adequately for computer-based records. It is, in my experience, extremely adaptable. Its primary advantage is after all its ability to cope with fluidity in record processes. Recently I learned something new about the origins of the series system. It is, of course, common knowledge that the series system was devised to cope with the complexities and frequency of administrative change in the Commonwealth Government. The new element in the equation is the series system as a control system in response to imperfect and inadequately controlled traditional record-keeping processes.[12] The basis of series description provides for contextual links both diachronic and synchronic. Those of us who do not delineate the series type (i.e. record series, document series, oral history series, etc.) are probably content to register electronic record systems as continuing series, while the purists may well feel it necessary to register them as specified *computer* or *electronic* series. It is after all primarily a matter of intellectual control. The physical control aspects are another issue and one which I happily leave at this point to those more expert than myself to deal.

In conclusion, the challenge for traditional archival theory and practice in the 1990s exists both within the traditional as well as the electronic records environments. As a profession we need to rethink the contribution of our theories and modify our operations and strategies. There is a lesson of history for us here. Think of what has happened to the railways. We can't afford to continue making trains and preparing detailed schedules or timetables if people want quicker, more convenient transportation.[13] Although if we run out of the fuel and resources for air travel we must be there, able to provide the details of how an elaborate rail network functioned.

Some shifts in archival thinking are required. We should use elimination processes in our disposal work and appraise for *continuing*

value rather than selecting for *permanent* value. The concepts of permanent and continuing become synonymous when dealing with computerised records. We should look to our roots as assessors and providers of *evidence* not mere information. We must get involved with the *moral defence* of *virtual* records and concentrate less on embracing physical custody at all costs.

Above all, however, the primary challenge is to adapt information management planning to include the essence of archival theory. The archivist must adapt the traditional role of keeper, develop beyond the outside perceptions of undertaker, and define as core mission a role as auditor on the IRM team, providing an organisation's safety net in ensuring the evidential as well as informational continuum as electronic records increase.

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