

# In the Agora

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## Editor's Note

*Following the publication of the November 1996 issue of Archives and Manuscripts, a number of postings were made to the Aus-archivists Listserv relating to Adrian Cunningham's commentary on the four lead articles in that issue. The postings were initiated by Luciana Duranti, who styled hers 'a very informal letter to the Editor of Archives and Manuscripts'. I have decided to reproduce these postings in the journal as quite a number of our readers are not subscribers to the Listserv, and I believe that the views expressed should be made available to all Archives and Manuscripts readers. Permission has been given by the authors and, apart from spelling and minor formatting changes, the postings have not been edited. They are being published here "In the Agora" rather than as Letters to the Editor as they were not written as formal, considered pieces, but rather as spontaneous and not necessarily precisely or fully articulated contributions to an electronic conversation. They need to be read in that spirit.*

*Sue McKemmish, Editor*

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Date: Mon, 06 Jan 1997 17:12:38 -0800 (PST)  
From: Luciana Duranti <luciana@unixg.ubc.ca>  
Subject: Cunningham's commentary  
To: aus-archivists@asap.unimelb.edu.au

Dear Australian Colleagues,

This is a very informal letter to the Editor of *Archives and Manuscripts* reacting to a 'Commentary' written by Adrian Cunningham in the November 1996 issue of the

journal, pp. 312-321. The reason why I choose not to write a formal letter to the Editor is that it would appear in the journal too late for people to remember what I am reacting to. I am not going to write a rebuttal of Mr. Cunningham's commentary, because he does not really address any of the concepts related to archives as a place. All he does is to discuss my personality and the effect I have on people, and to provide insights on the formation of his own thinking. Rather, I wish to make two points.

While I am rather amused by Mr. Cunningham's depiction of myself as something between a dragon lady and one of Odysseus' mermaids, with some features of a modern Pico della Mirandola (although I would not expect to read such sort of statements in a scholarly or even only professional journal, as they are best suited for a newspaper article or a popular magazine), I am very concerned about Mr. Cunningham's misrepresentation of my article on appraisal. I wonder whether, overwhelmed by my 'patented trawl through a few millennia of archival history', he stopped reading half-way through. My article does not state that 'there should be no place for appraisal in archival theory and practice', but precisely the opposite. What the article states is that, while the concept of value is in contrast with that of records, and while every selection represents a wound to the integrity of the archival body, the overriding principle of archival science is that the treatment of records is conditioned by the administrative-judicial system in which they are generated and/or used, and this makes place for selection in the modern context. However, the methodology for selection must also be based on the administrative-judicial context of the records, as opposed to the whims of historical research or documentation strategies.

My article on appraisal has generated debate, but only in relation to methods of acquisition, as nobody has ever interpreted it as a rejection of appraisal - before Mr. Cunningham, that is.

Another point I wish to make is that I am disturbed by the undisciplined approach to the analysis of literature expressed by Mr. Cunningham's commentary. He basically rejects the article on which he should comment (that on archives as a place) on the grounds of statements contained in another article and which were never used as support for the statements in the former. He rejects archival theory as a whole on the basis of his interpretation of my interpretation of archival concepts related to issues which are not the object of his discussion. And I could say much more but I won't. I only wish to add that I am weary of being singled for 'formidable erudition' when my archival knowledge is the average knowledge that every archivist must have in Italy before beginning to work in archives (and should have

everywhere); I am weary to be called Jenkinsonian (the 'Duranti/Jenkinson model?') when the only reason I cite Jenkinson is to provide a source in their own language to the people I am addressing (actually, Jenkinson is rather sloppy by European standards, and I would rather cite German or Italian theorists, who are much richer in content and rigorous in the expression of the concepts); and I am weary of being called traditionalist, when my interpretation of classical theory is quite iconoclast and innovative, as those who have read all the archival theorists of the past would well know.

In conclusion, if Mr. Cunningham and others wish to comment on my ideas they are very welcome to do so, and I will read with great respect what they have to say and will take it into account, but they should be courteous enough to stick to the ideas, and professional enough to analyse them in their proper context.

Luciana Duranti

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Archival and Information Studies, The University of British Columbia

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Date: Wed, 08 Jan 1997 15:34:43 +0000  
From: Chris Hurley <Christopher.Hurley@fcit.monash.edu.au>  
Subject: Cunningham's commentary  
To: aus-archivists@asap.unimelb.edu.au

It looks like another squall has struck the lad from Tangmalangmaloo (cf. *Archives and Manuscripts*, May 1996, p.21).

Adrian did say that his 'interpretation of the custody debate is inseparable from the personal journey towards understanding that the debate has encouraged me to pursue' and sought 'the indulgence of describing this journey by way of constructing an interpretation of the debate' (p.313).

I thought Adrian intended most of his personal comments about Luciana to be complimentary - but I accept that the objection to personalising debate holds regardless of whether the remarks are laudatory or derogatory.

Now that Adrian's piece is on the list I would like to try to clarify what I see as a central issue in this whole debate. I don't want to re-open the debate as such -

rather try to tease out a topic for future discussion.

To me, the heart of Adrian's commentary was on p.315 :

'Duranti places enormous emphasis on the concept of the archival "threshold" or "limit" . . . Few if any Australian archivists would quarrel with the concept of an archival threshold which records must cross. The quarrel that continuum-based thinkers have with Duranti concerns the point at which the records should cross the threshold and whether or not it necessitates a transfer of physical custody.'

I think Adrian is right that many self-professed continuum thinkers do agree about an archival boundary. I (for one) do not accept the concept of an archival threshold which records must cross. At least one Australian archivist, therefore, does 'quarrel' with that concept.

Moreover, this has nothing to do with physical custody. I believe I can bring records into my repository without taking them across an archival boundary (depending on how I choose to treat them) while my neighbour (who follows a custodial path) erects such a boundary and forces records to cross it when he takes them in. It follows that it is equally possible to construct (or choose not to construct) such a boundary when deciding to 'leave records with the agency'.

In other words, the archival boundary is a creation of our choice of archival methods. I believe it is possible to fulfil the archival mission by using methods which do not result in the creation of such a boundary - indeed that the creation of the boundary is inimical to fulfilment of the archival mission. Others disagree.

The alternative is to believe that the boundary or threshold is essential to its fulfilment. I have always assumed that my disagreement is not with those who wish to assume physical custody, but with those who believe in the archival threshold.

The fact that some advocates of distributed custody seem to accept the threshold has some interesting implications. At the end of the day, if you believe that the archival boundary or threshold is necessary (or that it is not co-extensive with the recordkeeping boundary - ie if you think that records can exist on either side of it) then you are ultimately committed (I think) to the custodial view.

In this respect, the issue to which Adrian has drawn our attention is at the very heart of the debate. I think.

An apparent confusion about this has always made me reserved about 'distributed custody'. I have never been clear about what it is that we are distributing the custody of. If your idea is to move records across an archival threshold and then put (or leave) the resulting 'archival collection' in many places (including creating agencies) I see no essential difference between that and what I understand to be the custodial model. And I have never understood why believers in the archival threshold appear to object so strongly to its extension into many places (including creating agencies).

On the other hand, methods which do not interpose an archival boundary (and this at bottom is the underlying logic of the so-called 'series system' approach) have virtually nothing to do with whether the records in question are held in an archival repository, in the 'agency', or both. In fact, in the paper world, they are always necessarily in both - ie the records held by the 'Archives' are merely portion of a fonds of which the 'active' part remains with the agency. [Whether the boundary of the fonds is formed by its association with a record-creator, its connection with a recordkeeping system, or its support for a function will affect the meaning of the word 'active' in this context.]

The debate so far has been very useful. I would like to see it focus more on this aspect in future.

Best wishes

Chris Hurley,  
Department of Librarianship,  
Archives & Records, Monash University

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Date: Wed, 08 Jan 1997 22:55:57 +1100  
From: Adrian Cunningham <ACUNNING@nla.gov.au>  
Subject: RE: Cunningham's commentary  
To: "aus-archivists@asap.unimelb.edu.au"

Dear Aus-archivists (and fellow travellers)

I am very glad that Luciana Duranti has felt compelled to respond to my Commentary piece in the latest *Archives and Manuscripts*. Given her willingness to

engage her critics in debate, I would have been disappointed had she chosen to ignore the piece. As I argued in my Commentary, the discourse is useful and highly instructive.

In response to her two main points of criticism I am prepared to graciously concede the first and vigorously deny the second.

As for her first point, I am extremely pleased to hear that Luciana believes there is a place for appraisal in archival theory and practice. When I read her appraisal article I took her to be arguing that the only acceptable appraisal is selection undertaken by records creators, in other words that it is not something that archivists ought to get involved with. I accept Luciana's argument that this is a misreading of her thesis, although I wish she had been somewhat more explicit as to how exactly archivists could conduct acceptable selection - her article gives a lot of advice on what we should not do but precious little guidance on what we should do. Nevertheless, I can understand her being miffed at my somewhat offhand dismissal of what is a very dense piece of scholarship. I would have been better advised to omit all reference to the appraisal article from my Commentary. I only mentioned it in passing and certainly did not use it as the basis for my assessment of the argument in 'Archives as a Place' (which is Luciana's second point of criticism). I mentioned the appraisal article only because it had catalytic significance in making me critically re-examine Luciana's writings on custody.

This brings me to Luciana's second point. The nub of my rejection of 'Archives as a Place' can be found on pp. 315-316 of my Commentary in the section headed 'The Vancouver Counter Attack'. In this section I consider the IDEAS of 'Archives as a Place' on their own merits. Luciana does not appear to have noticed this, instead being distracted by all my contextualising which served merely to set the scene.

This is unfortunate. I hope other readers of my Commentary do not overlook the main points I am making simply because I chose to couch my article in a somewhat unorthodox context. I am glad that Luciana is amused by my depiction of her. It was my intention to amuse. But my comments were not made gratuitously - they had a purpose. In the words of an old Canberra Professor (O H K Spate): 'You do not have to be solemn to be serious.' I was trying to entertain with a serious purpose. The purpose was to highlight my belief that, in assessing the impact of some debates, the personalities are often inseparable from the ideas. I recognise that such an approach can be dangerous as there is the risk that the personal considerations may become spiteful or discourteous, or that the ideas

themselves may get overlooked. I do not believe that I am guilty of either sin in this case. No malice towards Luciana was intended. On the contrary, I hope that my admiration for her style, output and impact was apparent. I just happen to disagree with her on custody. And at no point did my Commentary 'reject archival theory as a whole'.

Finally, Luciana concludes her posting by asserting that I should not be allowed to comment on her ideas unless I can be 'professional enough to analyse them in their proper context'. What exactly is a 'proper context' and who decides? There are any number of potential cognitive contexts which can be constructed to present an interpretation of a debate. As it was my Commentary I believed I was entitled to choose whichever context I felt was appropriate. No-one has a monopoly on 'proper context'. It is up to readers of my Commentary to decide whether or not they feel that my choice of context was appropriate, it is not for Luciana Duranti to dictate a single interpretative context in which her writings can be analysed.

My Commentary does not pretend to be the definitive interpretation of the custody debate. It is merely my interpretation, which I hope readers find stimulating and useful in terms of clarifying their own thinking. For every 100 followers of the custody debate there will probably be 100 different interpretations drawing upon 100 different contexts. These contexts are intellectual constructs and can never be absolute. Because there should be room for a plurality of views, I would never expect anyone to agree with everything I have to say. I do not, however, think I should be silenced because of some spurious charges of indiscipline and use of 'improper context'. I would be very interested to hear what other readers think.

Adrian Cunningham  
National Library of Australia

P.S. Thanks to Chris Hurley for his very useful teasing out of one of the key issues of the custody debate - the crossing of the archival threshold. I agree completely with Chris that the 'archival limit' should indeed be coexistent with the recordkeeping boundary (although there may be practical difficulties in implementing this in unregulated environments). The concept of records crossing an archival threshold is, I believe, still a useful one as it asserts the necessity for the exercise of archival control of records (from the point of creation). What do others think?

Adrian Cunningham

Date: Fri, 10 Jan 1997 09:55:38 -1100  
 From: Greg O'Shea <gregos@aa.gov.au>  
 Subject: FW: Cunningham's commentary  
 To: "'aus-archivists@asap.unimelb.edu.au'" <aus-archivists@asap.unimelb.edu.au>

Chris Hurley wrote:

'To me, the heart of Adrian's commentary was on p.315 :

"Duranti places enormous emphasis on the concept of the archival 'threshold' or 'limit' . . . Few if any Australian archivists would quarrel with the concept of an archival threshold which records must cross. The quarrel that continuum-based thinkers have with Duranti concerns the point at which the records should cross the threshold and whether or not it necessitates a transfer of physical custody."

I think Adrian is right that many self-professed continuum thinkers do agree about an archival boundary. I (for one) do not accept the concept of an archival threshold which records must cross. At least one Australian archivist, therefore, does "quarrel" with that concept.'

Make that two Chris (well almost ! read on). If the Continuum approach is about anything, it is about removing the artificial boundaries of the life-cycle approach.

Records are created, exist and at some point cease to exist. The length of the exist part is determined by (inter alia) the law, by recordkeeping professionals, archival authorities and the vicissitudes of God and economic rationalists. Where records are doesn't matter, although I believe their status (determined either after or before the fact of creation) should influence their management regime.

Just to throw a few cats into the pigeons' nest though Chris, does the determination of the status of a class of records (appraisal) represent a point at which something magical occurs (what was a record of uncertain value becomes one with a fixed value)? I wouldn't want to say anything about boundary crossing because that can be misinterpreted as a physical movement, but the determination of the record class which describes a function or activity (from which records arise) does represent the establishment of a metaphysical boundary (if not a physical one). The records will stay right where they are (and may do so forever) and be the same record but they will be now in a different category (ie records of continuing value not purely administrative value and therefore worthy of a variety of preservation strategies).



You touch on this when you say later on:

‘On the other hand, methods which do not interpose an archival boundary (and this at bottom is the underlying logic of the so-called “series system” approach) have virtually nothing to do with whether the records in question are held in an archival repository, in the “agency”, or both. In fact, in the paper world, they are always necessarily in both - i.e. the records held by the “Archives” are merely portion of a fonds of which the “active” part remains with the agency. [Whether the boundary of the fonds is formed by its association with a record-creator, its connection with a recordkeeping system, or its support for a function will affect the meaning of the word “active” in this context.]’

This is true, however the Series System as it was originally practiced in AA involved simultaneous Series Registration and Appraisal (the infamous SR&DS), ironically an approach we need to return to with functional appraisal. That approach involved determining what series existed and their disposal status or the disposal status of their component parts in the case of complex series. This approach obviously didn’t affect the location of the records (although under the ancien regime it flagged certain classes of records for current or future physical custody at the Archives) and wasn’t limited by the location of the records. What seemed to me to be of importance then as it is now is that we could do our job (fulfil the archival mission) without any concern for boundaries (apart from the obvious jurisdictional one of the Commonwealth).

‘An apparent confusion about this has always made me reserved about “distributed custody”. I have never been clear about what it is that we are distributing the custody of. If your idea is to move records across an archival threshold and then put (or leave) the resulting “archival collection” in many places (including creating agencies) I see no essential difference between that and what I understand to be the custodial model. And I have never understood why believers in the archival threshold appear to object so strongly to its extension into many places (including creating agencies).’

The use of the phrase ‘distributed custody’ in my experience has often been to correct the ‘non-custody’ line which it is often confused with and which is often used by the detractors of ‘distributed custody’. I agree it is not a very useful moniker, particularly in the Commonwealth context where records always ‘belong’ to the creating agency or current controlling agency (on behalf of the Commonwealth) and not the Archives (even if the records are in the physical custody of the Archives).

In that legal sense they can never cross a threshold. In that sense also you can't distribute custody of records, because that implies at some point that it was centralised, and of course it never was. I sometimes prefer to use the term 'distributed management' to get away from talking about custody at all. You may be able to think of a better phrase ?

We have to get away from focussing on the custody mindset and start thinking about fulfilling the archival mission within our respective jurisdictions (ie both inside and beyond the walls of our Keeps). Anyway that's my 'two bobs worth' ! (for the uninitiated, two shillings or 20 cents)

Greg O'Shea  
Assistant Director, Electronic Records, National Office,  
Australian Archives Canberra

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Date: Fri, 10 Jan 1997 16:30:42 +0000  
From: Chris Hurley <Christopher.Hurley@fcit.monash.edu.au>  
Subject: Cunningham's commentary  
To: aus-archivists@asap.unimelb.edu.au

I am taking the risk of responding to Greg O'Shea without having read his entire message. Every time someone at AA sends me a message, it causes my system at Monash to crash and the only way to get restarted is to delete the message unread. I can sometimes get part of it by printing without reading and this I have done here, but each of his larger paragraphs just trails off in mid sentence and won't print out.

It's amazing, really, how any of us sustains any faith at all in the future of electronic recordkeeping in circumstances like this.

**Question:**

Does the determination of the status of a class of records (appraisal) represent a point at which something magical occurs (what was a record of uncertain value becomes one with a fixed value)?

**Reply:**

No.

This is beginning to dig much more deeply into how we must re-engineer our methods - not simply adjust our stance on what records are or where they are kept. Certainly, AA's early attempt to combine appraisal with registration was perfectly consistent with their 'continuum' approach (in its day) but beyond their resources and capacity at the time.

In life-cycle mode, activity is undertaken in stages (logical, at least, and usually temporal also), viz. the record : - is created - is used - becomes inactive - is appraised. The record exists, therefore, prior to its appraisal. When we have something in our hands, we can examine it, evaluate it, feel it, smell it, mutter incantations over it, and finally reach a decision. Disposal scheduling (whether general or specific) didn't really alter this. Schedules are drawn up after an examination of records and applied on the assumption that records will be created in the future which are the same as those which have been created in the past. Something had first to exist to be appraised.

Appraisal was an activity which occurred in the interval between creation and extinction. The possibility of a magic moment arose because creation and appraisal were separated - giving rise to a space within which our magic to perform.

Magic is only possible if you make a separation. Records appear before the appraisal archivist like babies in cabbage patches. We look after them until they die (or we put them out of their misery). Discreetly, we do not want to enquire into their origins. We are not interested in how they came to be there.

I am not saying the life-cycle archivists were uninterested in the purpose of records, but they were not interested in whether or not they were created in the first place. This decision, according to strict Jenkinsonian precept, belonged with the records creator.

This is not just an archives problem. In how much of the records management literature do we find the same perspective?. It's all about how to manage, file, store, preserve, index, retrieve, etc., etc., etc. records **which already exist**. We are told how to organise, preserve, and deal with records, not how to make them.

So far as true recordkeeping is concerned, archivists and records managers are thus cast as cargo cultists looking up and waiting to catch records as they fall from the sky. Their task begins when the records drop into their arms. Questions like : How can I make a record of x? Should I make a record of x? are excised from their professional concerns.

In life-cycle mode, the disconnection between the creation of the record and appraisal techniques (and dare I say it, those 'practical' solutions some of us seem to be impatiently yearning for) is complete. Curiously, this often sits side by side with reconnection rhetoric.

So, we get proposals for solutions based on conversion (of something) to common formats which begin with the assumption that something worth preserving in common formats already exists. It is taken for granted that what we do will be preceded by a process (in which we are not involved) for creating the something that's worth preserving - ie records.

If you believe in disposal, our job will be to evaluate (appraise) them. Once we've done our stuff, we 'transfer' the ones we deem to be of 'continuing value' into the common format. If you think that electronic storage capacity makes disposal obsolete, you just transfer everything into the common format. It's just like we've always done - and isn't that a comforting thought!

But all of this assumes that there's someone out there making babies and putting them under cabbages for us to find.

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| Q. Who creates the records?            | A. The records creator creates the records. |
| Q. Who decides what records to create? | A. The records creator decides.             |
| Q. Who manages the records?            | A. The records manager.                     |
| Q. Who appraises the records?          | A. The archivist.                           |

In the post-custodial model, this will not work. Post-custodial archivists cannot appraise records in the traditional sense for the simple reason that there will be no records to appraise. Until we have re-engineered at least some part of what we used to think of as the 'appraisal' task (we haven't yet worked out what part) and take it forward into the creation task, we will go on looking up into the sky, but nothing is going to fall from it into our arms.

Rather, something will fall, which (for the sake of our sanity) some of us will go on believing are archives and go on treating as archives to make it appear that we still have something to contribute.

And yes - our data warehouses will fill up with something. Archivists will rush about 'appraising' something. And some people will go on believing it all means something. These people may indeed believe they are participating in 'something magical'.

Not me.

The rest of us have to try to deconstruct and reformulate the appraisal process. This is not a matter of choice. We can't choose to maintain traditional appraisal methodology into the electronic world (though we can deceive ourselves into thinking that we have). It is worth saying, by the way, that the technological pressures forcing us to abandon traditional methodology in the electronic world are paralleled by volume and resourcing pressures which have long been building up in the paper world.

In the electronic world, much of what was traditionally part of the appraisal stage of the life-cycle is now (necessarily) synonymous with creation. If we try to maintain the distinction between creation and appraisal, we simply cut ourselves out of the most important part of the appraisal work.

We should not be encouraging agencies to go on offering us records for evaluation prior to destruction. The decision to create a record reflects a decision about the need for it (the need to document a process) and this decision embodies all the key elements of an appraisal process.

In traditional terms, this decision was seen as comprising three sequential stages: Should I make a record? For how long should I keep it? Can I destroy it now? Paper transactions left a documentary trace, the only decision needing to be made was whether or not to file it. This administrative decision did not include any of the elements of disposal (except, maybe, how long should I keep it?). Electronic transactions will leave no trace unless there is intervention to capture records of specified processes and maintain them for a specified period - a decision, in other words, about which documentry traces should be captured as records (or, if you don't like that formulation, which records should be preserved).

These decisions include all the elements of appraisal. The need to create and maintain records must be articulated in the system design and cannot be left to a subsequent stage in a life-cycle. As Documenting the Future (AANSW) says : 'Appraisal becomes a matter of records creation and retention', rather than destruction.

An archives authority can (I believe) continue to regulate disposal and be directly involved with evaluation. We don't have to accept the counsel of despair that we should 'delegate' this to the agency under some process which pretends that the

Archives is still in control by use of guidelines, 'training', or audit. But the methodology has to change. It's like distributed custody itself. You can't leave the process unchanged and just hand part or all of it over to agencies saying, 'Well boys, now it's up to you'.

Disposal techniques are needed which are media-independent, and therefore impervious to both volume and technological changes. The object will be to provide, for each functional area of government, specified documentation requirements ('implementable decisions') which can be used by agency recordkeepers to produce an auditable outcome. Some part of the traditional appraisal role will need to be re-engineered into the formulation of documentation requirements. This will actually reverse the traditional order of tasks. We will no longer examine records after they are created. Rather, we will appraise them before they are created (in order that they may be created).

We don't know yet how this can best be done. Maybe by appraising functions rather than agency programs or recordkeeping systems (certainly not records). Archives, input into a disposal outcome would thus be independent of the actual administrative structure of an agency or of its recordkeeping system. Although the degree of attention given by Archives would vary from agency to agency, the framework of decision making would need to be comprehensive. A government-wide Disposal Policy would be needed to document and govern the whole process and be the ultimate source of authority for (and the criteria governing) all appraisal decisions.

Formulating such a Policy is **not** the job of the Archives. It must be done by the organisation of which the Archives is a part (ie the Government = records creator). In a social sense, a Policy of this kind is to be found in custom and tradition rather than as a formal written direction. This is partly the answer to Adrian's difficulty of the unregulated environment. People diarise because it is an established social custom, not because there is a central directive to do so. The need to formalise a Policy is greater within large organisations, both as a way of enforcing corporate will over multifarious parts and to provide a tool for purging most of what is created over the long term.

In its traditional role, the 'Archives' would not, of course, see its job as being to decide what records an agency needs. What I am saying here is that the traditional separation of 'appraisal' by government into different tasks assigned to the agency and to the Archives has now to be seen as a single process in which the respective roles need to be re-assessed.

In the initial stages, while in transition to a new methodology, the processes will probably still need to be managed on a system-by-system basis with Archives staff working closely with agencies willing to co-operate in the developmental stages of the new methodology. Until a mature methodology is developed, its application would, therefore, necessarily be piece-meal and not, what is ultimately envisaged, a whole-of-Government approach.

When appraisal is no longer undertaken as an ex post facto analysis of content and continuing worth, there will be no 'records of uncertain value'. The magic moment never arrives. It recedes. It disappears.

Poof!

As Greg points out, the need for functional appraisal is linked to the strategies implicit in the post-custodial approach to standards and documentation. I have said before that I think (for what that's worth) that the archivist's professional task in the post-custodial future lies principally in appraisal and documentation. Appraisal governs everything. Appraisal will not mark out the archival threshold, it will not define a magic moment, it will establish the recordkeeping boundary itself.

Best wishes

Chris Hurley,  
Department of Librarianship,  
Archives & Records, Monash University

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Date: 09 Jan 1997 19:35:48 -0500 (EST)  
From: RICKBARRY@aol.com  
Re: FW: Cunningham's commentary  
To: aus-archivists@asap.unimelb.edu.au

In a message dated 97-01-09 18:35:13 EST, Greg O'Shea wrote, in part:

'I sometimes prefer to use the term 'distributed management' to get away from talking about custody at all. You may be able to think of a better phrase?'

If I may, an additional 5 cents. The term 'distributed' isn't a bad one to keep in discussing this set of issues, if it can be made right in the RM sense, because it is a term commonly used in defining information architectures and can help in communications between RM and IT communities - something that is becoming more important in all of this discussion that archivists should facilitate to help promote architectures that support sound recordkeeping. Perhaps more appropriate terminology to describe this model would be 'distributed physical custody' when making the distinction between that and centralised logical control of records which should be part of the distributed model. Or - more simply and more broadly to go beyond the purely physical aspects where appropriate - 'distributed archival system' to help tie the archives and IT languages together. In other applications of distributed systems, the notion of distributed information systems with centralised directories is not considered as some kind of oxymoron.

'We have to get away from focussing on the custody mindset and start thinking about fulfilling the archival mission within our respective jurisdictions (ie both inside and beyond the walls of our Keeps).'

Yes. Including, I hope, the subjects of ethical issues and standards, appropriate organization for archives/records management functions and continued relevancy of current legislation surrounding recordkeeping and evidence.

Richard E. Barry,  
Barry Associates