Anticipating Accountability Processes

Albert Meijer

Albert Meijer is a researcher at the Centre for Public Management at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. His research focuses on the consequences of the use of information and communication technologies for political and legal accountability and is funded by the Dutch Program Digital Longevity, a co-operative project of the Ministry for Internal Affairs and the National Archives.

This article deals with the relationship between records management and accountability. Anticipating accountability processes is presented as a key concept. Analyses of business processes and information requirements of accountability forums are presented as a basis for records management which provides for accountability. In some situations these analyses can result in explicit knowledge, in others in tacit knowledge: based on two variables (structure of business process and degree of control of accountability forums), four contingent states are described. These distinctions can form the basis for differentiated records management systems, procedures and practices which can help organisations to anticipate different sorts of accountability processes.

Introduction

As a social scientist whose research concerns public accountability, I have become very interested in discussions about records management.[1] The importance of records for public accountability is evident. In spite of this, records management does not seem to have attracted much attention from researchers in the field of public administration. In the records management community, on the other hand, there is much discussion about approaches to records management but these are seldom linked to theories about accountability. Specialists on records management often state that records have to be preserved for accountability but they rarely explore what accountability is and what role these records play in accountability processes. Interesting ideas about the relation between records management and accountability, however, were developed by McKemmish, Eastwood, Upward

and Iacovino.[2] In this article I will try to contribute to their findings by tackling the link between accountability and records management from a social science perspective.[3]

Therefore I will not start with a discussion of creation, capture and preservation of records but will begin at the other end: the use of records in accountability processes. The institutions which hold government organisations accountable (accountability forums) require information to reduce uncertainties about the situation which is the object of an accountability process. Information is gathered from various sources. Undoubtedly often documents preserved by government organisations are an important source of information.

Government organisations – at least democratic ones – may need to anticipate these requirements to be able to account for their actions. In this article a combination of analyses of business processes and requirements of accountability forums will be presented as a way to anticipate accountability processes. I will draw upon modern theories about records management, such as the functional approach and the records continuum. Yet being a social scientist the emphasis is not on these approaches but on their use for anticipating accountability processes. The use of terms may differ from the vocabulary that is familiar to specialists on records management. I hope, however, that this different perspective will prove to be useful for acquiring a further understanding of the relationship between public accountability and records management.[4]

Accountability

In spite of its significance for democratic societies, accountability is not a well-defined term and passed into ordinary language only relatively recently.[5] Although there is no generally accepted definition, six elements of accountability can be distinguished: there is an event that triggers the accountability process, a person or organisation that is accountable,[6] an action or situation for which the person or organisation is accountable and a forum to which the person or organisation is accountable. Furthermore, there are criteria to judge the action or situation, and, if necessary, there are sanctions which can be imposed on the person or organisation.

These six elements provide a first conceptualization of accountability. Further understanding can be gained by looking at different phases of accountability: the information phase, the discussion phase and the sanction phase.[7] In the first phase the forum gathers information from various sources and reconstructs what has happened. In the second phase actions are discussed and judged according to certain norms and criteria. In the third phase

sanctions can be applied. Since this article is about the relation between accountability and records management, I will focus on the first phase, the information phase. I assume that, before the forum can discuss or sanction government actions, it needs to reconstruct what has happened. Information is needed to reduce uncertainties. If sufficient information is available, an accountability forum can make a reconstruction of what has happened.[8]

Also, different types of accountability can be distinguished. Romzek and Dubnick present a typology of four types of accountability.[9] They indicate that there are two types of internal accountability (bureaucratic and professional) and two types of external accountability (legal and political). They argue that bureaucratic and legal accountability exercise a high degree of control over agency actions. Professional and political accountability exercise a low degree of control.

These types of accountability can be illustrated with examples concerning psychiatric institutions.[10] In psychiatric hospitals peer reviews of treatment of patients can be considered to be a form of professional accountability. Management checks of money spend on meals and kitchen stock is an example of hierarchical accountability. Furthermore, psychiatric institutions may be confronted with legal accountability when involuntary admissions are reviewed by an external board. Audits of standards of treatment and care in psychiatric hospitals provide an example of political accountability.

These elements, phases and types provide a first conceptualization of accountability processes. In addition, one can notice that these accountability processes occur after activities have been executed or decisions have been taken. The expectation, however, that there could be an accountability process may influence actions and decisions of individuals of organisations. When a decision has to be taken or an activity done, expected reactions of accountability forums may be taken into account. Romzek and Dubnick refer to this as 'managing expectations'.[11] This can also be called 'anticipating'.

Anticipating

In literature on public accountability the concept of 'anticipating' plays an important role. Friedrich mentions the 'rule of anticipated reactions':

> The influence of public opinion or of a parliament upon the conduct of governmental affairs is devoid of ascertainable manifestations. Why is this so? ... because the person or group which is being influenced anticipates the reactions of him or those who exercise the influence. This inclination of all persons exposed to influence to anticipate the reactions of him who has the power to issue commands, bestow benefits or inflict penalties of all sorts, constitutes a general rule of politics.[12]

Generally, government officials will anticipate the reactions of accountability forums. Certain forums will, therefore, be considered to be important. These may include Parliament, judges, the press, the General Accounting Office, and the National Ombudsman. Government organisations may determine relevant forums by analysing formal rules and obligations regarding tasks and business processes. Furthermore, implicit relations between various actors involved in public administration are taken into consideration.

In some situations anticipating may strongly influence actions and decisions of government officials. In others it may not. Government officials will anticipate accountability when they expect accountability processes to occur. This happens, for example, with politically sensitive issues or in situations where government organisations can expect legal claims. In other situations, however, managers and other civil servants will not focus on anticipating accountability but on executing tasks. Anticipating accountability processes will only play a minor role in their actions and decisions.

One should notice that anticipating can influence different aspects of government action. Firstly, government officials will anticipate the norms and criteria of accountability forums. Norms and criteria are central to the discussion and sanction phases of accountability processes. Decision-makers, for example, will anticipate reactions of forums. They will avoid taking decisions that they cannot defend before them. These forums, however, require information about these actions and decisions to be able to discuss them. Therefore, government officials will also anticipate the information requirements of accountability forums: decision-makers will also preserve documents about their decisions so that accountability forums can evaluate these decisions.

Although anticipating the information requirements of forums seems to facilitate accountability there may be drawbacks. Too much emphasis on anticipating information requirements can lead to undesired consequences when creating documents for accountability becomes more important than the actual execution of tasks. Therefore in certain situations anticipating these requirements will only play a minor role in organisational document management. In these situations organisations will not specifically preserve information for accountability. Accountability forums may have to depend on the spill-over of business processes. Records managers will then only focus on records management to support the business process. In this article, however, I will only discuss those situations where organisations do anticipate accountability.

Another remark should be made concerning the results of anticipating accountability processes. Organisations can anticipate the information phase

of accountability processes in different ways. They can decide to create or preserve certain documents but decisions not to preserve certain documents can also be regarded as a form of anticipating. Furthermore, risk management can also be regarded as a manner of anticipating accountability processes.[13]

To anticipate accountability processes, organisations develop systems, procedures and structures to warrant that they can be held accountable. One could argue that the requirement to anticipate accountability is integrated in the general design of public administration. This can be seen in Weber's description of bureaucracies.[14] An essential element of these bureaucracies is the so-called 'Aktenmässigkeit': the principle of an administration based on written documents. Bureaucracies can account for their actions through these documents. Even within the best organized bureaucracies, however, individuals have a certain discretionary power. Therefore, anticipating accountability processes by organisations is complemented with anticipating by individuals. A civil servant may, for example, take notes of a telephone conversation because he or she expects that this conversation may be important in a legal accountability process.

The focus in most studies on accountability in public administration is on anticipating norms and criteria. Romzek and Dubnick, for example, present an interesting analysis of the Challenger tragedy in terms of anticipating different accountability forums.[15] For a discussion about records management, however, anticipating information requirements seems more relevant. Government organisations anticipate these requirements by creating, capturing and preserving documents concerning their decisions and activities.

Analyses

Anticipating accountability processes starts with an analysis of organisational structures and business processes: government organisations have to analyse what they are doing and how they are doing it. They need to analyse their structures, tasks and business processes to know which documents they may have to provide to accountability forums. An analysis of business processes will indicate which documents are created or used within the organisation.

This argument is familiar to the records management community: adequate approaches to these analyses have been developed. Traditional approaches to records management - still widely practised - focus on organisational structures. Records are organized according to the administrative body (organisation, department or division) which created or used them.

In recent years this approach has been criticised. There has been a lot of discussion about a 'post-custodial' model. The emphasis has shifted to the

functional context in which activities that create or use documents occur. For instance, Bearman emphasizes the centrality of 'business transactions'.[16] According to Bearman, government organisations should not focus on structures but on the business transactions. These transactions form the object of accountability processes: government organisations have to provide 'evidence of business transactions'. [17]

Australian records management scientists have developed the records continuum approach.[18] A transaction is argued to be a component of an activity. Activities are components of functions, and functions are part of purposes. Actors involved in these acts are connected to these elements: respectively actor, work unit, institution and jurisdiction. Thirdly, a document is assumed to be a part of a record, an archives, and archives. The final element of the records continuum approach is the 'evidential axis' consisting of representation traces, evidence, organisational memory and collective memory. These elements will return in the analysis of requirements of accountability forums.

In summary, to anticipate accountability, business processes (transactions, activities, functions and purposes) and document creation and use within these processes have to be analysed, and these business processes have to be related to organisational structures and responsibilities (actor, work unit, institution and jurisdiction).

The second element of anticipating accountability processes is an analysis of requirements of accountability forums. Besides knowing their own organisation, government organisations also have to know external requirements. They have to acquire an understanding of which documents (their information content, form and quality) accountability forums may need to make reconstructions of accountability situations.

In theories of records management – as I have indicated above – 'evidence' is a central concept. Therefore evidential requirements have been investigated. In the Pittsburgh Project the requirements of records or recordkeeping systems by different professional groups (lawyers, auditors, records managers, information technologists, managers and medical professionals) have been analysed to support functional requirements for evidence in recordkeeping.[19] In the research project at the School of Library, Archival & Information Studies of the University of British Columbia the old science of diplomatics has been promoted to warrant the evidential value of documents.[20] The importance of completeness, reliability and authenticity of documents is emphasised.

In both research projects, however, there seems to be little attention to the use of evidence. Evidential value seems to be regarded as a qualitative attribute of documents. Questions like who needs evidence and what kind of evidence

is needed in specific circumstances receive little attention.[21] From a social science perspective, however, these issues seem crucial. Power, for example, indicates that evidence is always relative to the rules of acceptance for particular communities.[22] If these communities are equal to the whole of society, documents may qualify as 'authoritative resources'.[23] If, however, these communities are confined to certain accountability forums – which is the perspective I have developed using the concept of anticipating – attention to the use of evidence is required. A brief, informal note may, for example, be accepted as evidence by a parliamentary enquiry committee but not by a judge. Accountability forums will determine which documents they will accept as evidence. Therefore, one may argue, their requirements for documents (information content, form and quality) need to be analysed.

Approaches to information management may offer useful suggestions for analysing information requirements. Davis and Olson distinguish four strategies.[24] Although their discussion concerns information management within organisations and informational rather than evidential value, these strategies may also be applied to the analysis of requirements of accountability forums. The first strategy is 'asking'. Organisations can ask representatives of accountability forums about their requirements. A second strategy is deriving requirements from an existing information system. In this case new systems for anticipating accountability processes can be based upon existing systems. Thirdly, information requirements can be synthesised from characteristics of the utilising system. This strategy could, for example, consist of an analysis of legal requirements for certain business processes. The last strategy is discovering information requirements from experimentation with an evolving information system. According to this approach organisations can, for example, implement a new records management system and wait for the first court case to check whether the system fits the judge's requirements.

Thus, the analysis of business processes and organisational structures can be supplemented with strategies for analysing requirements of accountability forums. These analyses can indicate which documents these forums require to reduce uncertainties in the information phase of accountability processes.

Contingency approach

So far I have indicated how analyses of business processes and requirements of accountability forums can be used for anticipating accountability processes. These analyses, however, may have to be carried out in different ways for different situations. In this section I will present a contingency approach based on two relevant variables: the structure of business processes and the degree of control of accountability forums.

Both the sequence of activities and the use and creation of documents in structured business processes are highly predictable.[25] Examples of these business processes are granting construction permits, social benefits, and housing subsidies. They are generally standardised and exhibit a high level of centralised control. Civil servants executing these processes tend to have little discretionary power. Many business processes in public administration, however, are not well-structured. For these processes neither the sequence of activities nor the use and creation of documents may be predictable.[26] They can be labelled ill-structured processes. Examples of these business processes are planning a road, dealing with riots, and a military intervention. In these processes civil servants may have considerable discretionary power in executing the activities.

Structured processes can be analysed to determine which documents need to be preserved for accountability. Methods for this type of analysis were discussed in the previous section. For ill-structured processes, however, these methods cannot easily be applied. One could argue that all documents which are either created or used need to be preserved for accountability. This, however, does not answer the question: which documents need to be created? It may only be possible to determine to a limited extent through explicit analyses which documents will be needed for accountability (for example, the document containing the final decision). However, knowledge about the specific activities is needed to determine more precisely which documents need to be created and captured. This cannot be standardised. For ill-structured processes specific decisions need to be taken about which activities have to be documented. These decisions are not based on explicit analyses but rather on implicit analyses of business processes. Although it would be difficult (or even impossible) to analyse the sequence of all minor and major activities in the process, civil servants will have developed an understanding of which activities need to be documented. For example, they know when to write minutes of a meeting and when this is not required. This 'tacit knowledge' can be regarded to be the result of implicit analyses of business processes.[27] Based on tacit knowledge civil servants may decide to create or capture documents for accountability.

A second distinguishing variable is the degree of control of accountability forums exert over actions of government organisations. Requirements of accountability forums generally seem to be clearer for types of accountability with a high degree of control (legal and hierarchical accountability) than for types with a low degree of control. Requirements of accountability forums may be clear because of explicit legal regulations or hierarchical procedures. For example, Ross reports that in psychiatric hospitals when files were

frequently used by an external legal audit committee to examine complaints by patients concerning their treatment, more detailed records were created.[28]

When accountability forums exert less control (professional and political accountability) requirements of accountability forums may not be clear. In many situations specific regulations do not exist. Furthermore, political forums often do not have clear requirements. No one can, for example, exactly predict the requirements of parliamentary enquiry committees. Ross provides the example of how a task force which was reviewing a psychiatric institution examined meal books, menus and stock records to investigate allegations of fraud and theft. The institution involved could hardly have predicted that their meal books were going to be used for accountability.

When accountability forums exert a high degree of control, requirements of accountability forums tend to be clear and thus they can be analysed with the methods presented in the previous section. This is generally not the case for professional and political accountability. Requirements tend not to be clear and thus explicit analyses may be more difficult. Experienced civil servants, however, may develop an understanding of which documents may be required by accountability forums. Although they may not know exactly which information will be required by an parliamentary enquiry committee, they may know that political accountability forums are generally interested in finding out who was informed about certain decisions. This can also be regarded as 'tacit knowledge' which is the result of an implicit analysis of requirements of accountability forums.

Two contingent variables have been presented: structure of business processes and degree of control of accountability forums. These variables have consequences for the nature of the knowledge which can be generated for anticipating accountability processes. Knowledge can either be explicit or tacit. All four situations and the types of knowledge are presented in Table 1. These four situations require different approaches to records management. For structured business processes with a high degree of control of accountability forums explicit analyses are possible. These explicit and detailed descriptions of requirements can be translated in explicit and standardised records management procedures: anticipating accountability processes at the organisational level. Independent specialists (records managers) can determine according to rules which documents have to be created, captured and preserved. Possibly this task can even be automated.[29] Individual civil servants executing these structured business processes only have to monitor the workflow. If the business process is well-structured but the degree of control of accountability forums is low, a reasonably standardised and centralised approach still seems possible. An explicit analysis of business processes can

Table 1   Types of knowledge

	Structured process	**Ill-structured process**
High degree of control of accountability forums	• Explicit knowledge of business process • Explicit knowledge of requirements of accountability forum	• Tacit knowledge of business process • Explicit knowledge of requirements of accountability forum
Low degree of control of accountability forums	• Explicit knowledge of business process • Tacit knowledge of requirements of accountability forum	• Tacit knowledge of business process • Tacit knowledge of requirements of accountability forum

result in a description of the process. In addition tacit knowledge of managers and civil servants needs to be tapped to determine which documents need to be created and captured for accountability.

In the third situation – a high degree of control of accountability forums but ill-structured business process – a decentralised approach seems needed. The creation and use of documents for accountability cannot be standardised and requires individual decisions. Records management cannot just be carried out by records managers: cooperation at an individual level is called for. The managers responsible for and the civil servants executing the activities need to be involved in the capture and creation of documents. They are the only ones who know enough about the activities and the documents to be able to judge whether documents may be required in a process of accountability. This approach, however, can be supported with clear guidelines for civil servants concerning the requirements of accountability forums. This may be implemented in the form of a decision support system.

The last situation – ill-structured processes with a low degree of control of accountability forums – also calls for a decentralised approach. In these situations it is also not possible to give clear guidelines concerning the creation and capture of documents. Creation and capture of documents is based on tacit knowledge of civil servants. They can be supported by records managers but it will not be possible to give them clear guidelines concerning the requirements of accountability forums. At the most it will be possible to tap tacit knowledge concerning requirements of accountability forums and translate this into general guidelines for civil servants.

Conclusion

In this article I have indicated that accountability processes can be described according to elements, phases and forms. Organisations anticipate the norms

and criteria of accountability forums but also their information requirements. To anticipate accountability, analyses of organisational structures, business processes and requirements of accountability forums are required. Together these can form the basis for anticipating accountability processes.

These analyses, however, cannot always be carried out in the same manner. Structured business processes require explicit analyses, ill-structured processes implicit analyses. Furthermore, different approaches are called for when the degree of control of accountability forums is either high or low. These different analyses result in different approaches to records management: a contingency approach.

No 'one best way' to anticipate accountability processes can thus be presented. A combination of explicit and implicit analyses of business processes and explicit and implicit analyses of requirements of accountability forums is required. These analyses and distinctions can form the basis for differentiated records management systems, procedures and practices which can help organisations and individuals to anticipate differentiated accountability requirements.

ENDNOTES

1 The author would like to thank Erika Hokke, Vincent Homburg, Peter Horsman, Christopher Pollitt and Ignace Snellen for their valuable comments on this article.

2 S McKemmish and F Upward (eds), *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability Through Recordkeeping*, Ancora Press, Melbourne, 1993.

3 This is, of course, not the first description of records management from a social science perspective. Upward, for example, gives an interesting description of changes in records management using Gidden's Structuration Theory. See F Upward, 'Structuring the Records Continuum, Part Two: Structuration Theory and Recordkeeping', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 25, no. 1, May 1997, pp. 10–35.

4 This article is limited to the public sector since this is the sector I know most about, but I have no reason to think that the ideas presented do not apply to the private sector.

5 P Day and R Klein, *Accountabilities: Five Public Services*, Tavistock Publications Ltd, London, 1987, p. 26.

6 It may not be easy to determine who is to be held accountable for certain situations. See M Bovens, *The Quest for Responsibility: Accountability and Citizenship in Complex Organisations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, for an excellent discussion of these matters.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

8 I would also like to highlight the 'potential' accountability of governmental organisations. Even if organisations are not actually held accountable, if there is no trigger for the accountability process, the possibility that they could be will make it more likely that government officials will act responsibly (see Bovens, p. 39).

9 BS Romzek and MJ Dubnick, 'Accountability in the Public Sector: Lessons from the Challenger Tragedy', *Public Administration Review*, vol. 47, May/June 1987, pp. 227–38.

10 F Ross, 'Archival Documents, Accountability and Continuity: Recordkeeping in Victoria's Psychiatric Institutions' in McKemmish and Upward, pp. 105–18.

11 Romzek and Dubnick, p. 228.

12 CJ Friedrich, *Man and His Government. An Empirical Theory of Politics*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1963, p. 203.

13 D Bearman, *Electronic Evidence: Strategies for Managing Records in Contemporary Organisations*, Archives and Museum Informatics, Pittsburgh, 1994, p. 23.

14 M Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grindriss der verstehende Soziologie*, Johannes Winckelman, Köln-Berlin, 1964.

15 Romzek and Dubnick, pp. 230–4.

16 D Bearman, 'Record-Keeping Systems', *Archivaria*, vol. 36, Autumn 1993, pp. 16–36.

17 In his ideas about records management Bearman seems to have been influenced by ideas about auditing. 'Business transaction' seems to be directly related to financial auditing. Furthermore, the concept of evidence is at the heart of contemporary thinking about the operational dimensions of auditing practice: auditors verify on the basis of evidence (see M Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 69).

18 F Upward, 'Structuring the Records Continuum, Part One: Postcustodial Principles and Properties', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 2, November 1996, pp. 268–85 and 'Structuring the Records Continuum, Part Two: Structuration Theory and Recordkeeping', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 25, no. 1, May 1997, pp. 10–35.

19 *www.lis.pitt.edu/~nhprc/*

20 L Duranti, *Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham (Maryland), 1998.

21 The lack of attention for the use of records may be attributed to the emphasis that has always been put on the historical value of records and thus the uncertainties about the use of records past our lifetimes. As Schellenberg concludes the methodology of the archival profession is a compound of the ideas of librarians, historians, and archivists (TR Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1965, p. 59). Although in North America a separate recordkeeping profession developed, European and Australian recordkeepers have always been strongly influenced by archivists (see L Iacovino, *Things in Action: Teaching Law to Recordkeeping Professionals*, Ancora Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 20).

22 Power, p. 69.

23 F Upward, 'Structuring the Records Continuum, Part Two', pp. 10–35.

24 GB Davis and MH Olson, *Management Information Systems: Conceptual Foundations, Structure and Development*, 2nd edition, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1985, pp. 480–8.

25 JJM Uijlenbroek, *Designing Electronic Document Infrastructures*, Het Expertise Centrum, The Hague, 1997.

26 *Ibid.*

27 M Polyani, *The Tacit Dimension*, Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1966.

28 F Ross, pp. 105–18.

29 See P Horsman, 'A Knowledge-based Electronic Record-keeping System', in *Proceedings of the DLM-Forum on Electronic Records, Brussels, 18–20 December 1996*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 1997, pp. 54–9.