

After WikiLeaks is it all over for The Archives?

On 23 March 2011 in Sydney, new recordkeeping and archives discussion group The Recordkeeping Roundtable, in conjunction with the NSW Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists, hosted the event 'After WikiLeaks, is it all over for The Archives? WikiLeaks and the future of recordkeeping in a connected world'.

BY CASSIE FINDLAY



The event was facilitated by Anne Picot, Deputy University Archivist at the University of Sydney, and a member of Standards Australia's IT21 Records Management Committee.

After a welcome by Hamish Hawthorn, CEO of the event's sponsor ATP Innovations, Anne Picot kicked off proceedings by outlining the ground rules for the evening and with some observations on WikiLeaks, journalism and archives. She introduced the first of the event's four speakers.

Cassie Findlay

Cassie Findlay sought to describe her reactions to WikiLeaks and frame these in the context of being a recordkeeping professional / archivist. She described the stark contrast that she had seen at the start of the year between the media reporting on the 1 January release of 1980 Cabinet records by the National Archives of Australia and the coverage, discussion and debate stimulated by the recent releases by WikiLeaks such as CableGate and the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs. She posed the question: are WikiLeaks doing our job for us and doing it better?

In considering this question, Cassie spoke about the nature of our role as recordkeeping professionals – in particular our responsibility to enable the creation and use of records to serve as evidence and agents of accountability and reform. She argued that we need to keep sight of our contract with the citizens of our democracy to ensure they have the best possible 'historical record' – including records created today – on which to base their decisions and interactions with governments and corporations. Are we living up to that contract at present with gatekeeper mindsets and blanket records closure rules?

As a profession, she said, we have extremely powerful ways of placing records in their temporal, administrative and functional contexts – why should these understandings be only available for records of 30 year old events?

Cassie also raised some questions about some digital recordkeeping principles which do not seem to be so important to the media or the broader community who have been users of WikiLeaks records. She also explored the notion that an archive is designed to be permanently available as promised by WikiLeaks, as compared with some of our models for trusted digital repositories.

She concluded by asking: has WikiLeaks shown us as a profession to be hopelessly out of step with the possibilities offered to us by technology and the online world?

Stephen Gillies

Stephen Gillies spoke about users' expectations of information access today, referencing a quote from 1945 about the 'library of the future'. Even in that era, Stephen said, there was an awareness that information output would very quickly fill the largest repositories and that there needed to be some movement away from keeping information physically.

The archives profession, he argued, needs to take note of the way people's expectations and the technology are moving – we

are already at the future state imagined by Neal Stephenson in his 1992 book *Snow Crash*, in which people physically interacted with their information in virtual reality. If our content is not visible and accessible using the latest tools it will be overlooked.

Stephen also spoke about the difficulties inherent in the categorisation of information, the challenges posed by the massive quantities of data generated by social media and the prevalence of the cloud as a platform for not just documents but organisations' entire computing capabilities. Stephen concluded his presentation by explaining the model that the big players in online technologies are now following, and that archivists should heed:

- Connect anyone
- On any device
- Access anything
- At any time
- From anywhere

Linda Tucker

Linda Tucker explained that the Office of the Information Commissioner is part of a worldwide movement away from *freedom of information* towards the *right to information*. The emphasis is now on the importance of open access, proactive release and a clear recognition of the importance of greater transparency in government. But the role of agencies is not, she argued, to be official versions of WikiLeaks, but rather to be stewards of information and ensure that it is managed and released in ways that promote transparency, while acknowledging important privacy protections.

Linda considered possible drivers for the advent of WikiLeaks. She suggested that what has been seen by some as a 'free for all' is perhaps a reaction to what Leo Strauss termed the elitist notion of democracy – the idea of the 'necessary lie'. That is, that elites should rule, aware of the actual state of things, and feed the people favours to keep them happy in their 'blessed ignorance'. She noted that in the same way that archivists have a contract with the people in a democracy, citizens take up a social contract with government whereby they relinquish autonomy in exchange for certain privileges. WikiLeaks has challenged the assumption that the State knows best and that the public could not survive the unveiling of the fables that have been sustaining us. This is a valid argument, Linda argued – particularly in an era of claimed open government.

Some have argued that WikiLeaks may in fact promote greater secrecy but in Linda's view there will always be those who leak information where they see it being withheld to mask misconduct. She said that the role of agencies is to act in the spirit of GIPA to proactively release evidence of actions – including those that perhaps did not go to plan, to take the wind out of the sails of a hostile media or other detractors.

Perhaps, she argued, the fear of disclosure limiting public servants' frankness that some have argued will be a result

The speakers

1 Cassie Findlay is an archivist and recordkeeping professional who is currently responsible for State Records NSW's digital records strategy, Future Proof.

2 Stephen Gillies is President of the System Administrators Guild of Australia, Principal Consultant for the IT security and advisory business 3rd Base Networks (3BN) and a founding member of the Internet Society of Australia.

3 Linda Tucker is Manager of casework and compliance for the NSW Office of the Information Commissioner, who prior to joining the OIC worked in employment and migration law as a solicitor and barrister and as an academic on international environmental law.

4 Barbara Reed is a principal of consulting and training firm Recordkeeping Innovation, internationally known writer and thinker and contributor to a number of national and international standards for recordkeeping.

of WikiLeaks will instead result in people behaving in a more circumspect and appropriate manner in their communications, knowing they may be out there for all to see. Linda urged us to see the work of the Information Commissioner in these terms – as offering a framework for better managed, more open information that will flow on to a public service with greater integrity and less to fear.

Barbara Reed

Barbara Reed started her talk with the observation that WikiLeaks has jolted us as recordkeeping professionals, by quietly reinventing our role. Barbara proposed that many of our core professional understandings and practices were broken, and that in many cases this is a result of our processes being based around lapses of time and 'end product' thinking. Models and rules for access, security classification and appraisal have all fallen foul of this trend, resulting in messy and ineffective regimes.

Barbara posed the question: What is an archive? Is WikiLeaks an archive? She suggested that an archive is defined by a community – this is something that we have seen develop on the internet over the last decade. If so, she argued, then our notions of archives that are based on control by authoritative bodies and which respect strict boundaries between the personal and private, between government and organisations, do not stand up any more. What implications does this have for our role?

Barbara also explored the notions of archives and trust, authenticity and originality. The WikiLeaks records are authentic copies, not originals, she said, but in a digital world what does

this signify? She also considered the formation of the archive. WikiLeaks presents us with a miscellany of 'stuff', ripped out of its originating context and brought together by a philosophy rather than an administrative or juridical rule. It's located in many places, it's in the cloud. All of these characteristics present fundamental challenges to the way we as recordkeeping professionals see the world.

Barbara concluded her remarks with a challenge – everyone is an archivist now, records are an incredibly powerful political lever, we need to understand this and move away from time lapsed, end product thinking and start working much more proactively on the formation of archives – from the front end. **IQ**

- For a full report on the event and to listen to podcasts of the speakers' presentations and Q&A session, go to: <http://recordkeepingroundtable.org/>



About the Author

CASSIE FINDLAY is an archivist and recordkeeping professional at State Records NSW. Her story on State Record's digital records strategy, Future Proof, is on page 14.

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