

Access Today

In 1989 David Bearman threw virtual bombs at the practices of the archival profession. In Australia we responded to the emerging issues of digital recordkeeping influenced by Bearman's challenging analysis. However access has long been an area somewhat neglected within the Australian recordkeeping profession. Access indeed was not a part of the AS4390 set of standards which in many ways encapsulated our professional response to digital recordkeeping in the 1990s and attempts to incorporate public access¹ within international recordkeeping standards have failed to gain professional traction². Those professionals specialising in 'reference and access' addressing the 'cultural goals' have long felt isolated and ignored by the development of records continuum thinking³. Another way of framing the discussion is to suggest that the concept of public access itself needs to be considered well beyond the walls of the archival institution, and that the artificial splitting of concerns about public access according to age (and custodial thinking) will not serve us well professionally. Addressing this is core to reconceptualising the access function for the future in the digital environment. Every individual is a key stakeholder in access to records, potentially if not always in practice – not simply the 'users we prefer', already trained and skilled in using our descriptive methods to enable retrieval. Our access frameworks are fragmented into multiple pieces of legislation further complicated by incompatibility across jurisdictional boundaries – while recordkeeping is increasingly location-less.

How then do we reconceptualise the function of providing public access and reconnect all aspects of public access in the digital environment? The challenges raised by the 'Reinventing Archival Methods' workshop included:

- Emphasising the human dimension of archives, acknowledging the place of emotion in archives
- Conceptually reconnecting the public access framework
- Exploring boundaries: digitisation=access; access=appraisal
- Defining infrastructure to address these issues – how well do our records/archives systems meet these requirements?

Emphasising the human dimension of archives, acknowledge the place of emotion in archives

Managing records as passive objects or end products is missing an opportunity to connect. Records may be an outcome of a process, but records have also been a mechanism to objectify decision making – to remove the decision making from the consequences of that decision making. Increasingly we know that records reflect decisions that profoundly affect people, people's lives and their rights and obligations. While this mantra about rights and obligations has always been in the archival vocabulary, recordkeeping professionals have been inevitably reflected the organisational

¹ Note: this discussion has been limited to public access, rather than the intricacies of internal access within organisations, which have largely been professionally articulated

² Reference the failed work on Access

³ Paul MacPherson, 'Public access to post-current government records' Archives and Manuscripts 30 no 1

view of records – linked to processes which are described in organisational terms which may or may not be the same as those of the subject of the record – depersonalised perhaps to the ‘data subject’.

Records are imbued with people. They are the creators, the processors and often the subject of records. They are the retrievers, users and re-users of records. The acceptance of agents as one of the core metadata entities for recordkeeping underlies this acceptance within our professional practice and is one of the core building blocks of the elegant conceptual ‘Australian series system’.

Many archives have their basis in the shaping of identity that consciously reflects the society or organisational reality that the creators of that archive wished to convey. This is true no less for government archives than of community and organisational archives. Indeed the trend to community archives and the celebration of identity through conscious representation in the archives, or by construction of alternative archives, is a feature of contemporary archival discourse.

The emotional impact of records to the people or relations of people in the records has never been clearer than in the impact of access to records relating to children removed from family, most particularly evident in the 1990s Bringing them Home report, exhibitions and proactive archival involvement. The development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services, published in 1995 by the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) provides a great model for engagement with particular communities. The provision of counselling services and trusted guides to persons affected by disturbing revelations in records also emerged at this time. The spate of enquiries, commissions and initiatives to acknowledge damage and assist children removed from family through migration, forced adoption, or children in institutional care has culminated in Australia with the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Here issues of access to records cross all organisational barriers, and it is somewhat disturbing to find recordkeeping professionals not always front and centre in contextualising, explaining and assisting interpretation of records relevant to affected community and organisations. Indeed anecdotal tales of poor and insensitive presentation of records to individuals from this community can be shaming to hear. While when sensitised to impact, archivists clearly step up to the mark to provide sensitive access, does this sensitivity to impact operate across the recordkeeping spectrum? What can be done to recognise the emotional impact of people’s lives in records. When does abstract interest supercede provision of sensitive access? Is it age of the record? Is it the circumstances of the research? Is it the relation of the person to the case? What impact does the ‘channel’ of the delivery have – should protocols more generally be developed to enable sensitive information to be delivered more appropriately? Who determines what is sensitive? Can this be unified across sites of access - the web, in the creating organisation or in the archival reading room?

If people are central to records, what can we do to enable and privilege this? And how appropriate is this? Personal information has never been more important to individuals, yet privacy and personal data protection is often considered to be antithetical to recordkeeping concerns. Do we understand the dimensions of privacy protection appropriately? Knee jerk reactions which cause oppositional stances between the protections of personal information and the recordkeeping profession are inappropriate. To what extent can metadata management, the flagging of records containing personal information, the permissions accorded by individuals to records – following the crowd-

sourced appraisal model of the census returns – be incorporated into our practice to better enforce individual's wishes for managing their personal information?

Once we have information about people in our records, is it ours? Are there limits to what is appropriate use? The interesting case of the mooted 'Right to Forget' Directive in Europe raises the ire of French archivists concerned for the continuation of recordkeeping as we have known it⁴, but also provides a great opportunity to embrace a different model of constructing recordkeeping, more interactive, one more respectful to the wishes of the person about whom information is being created/captured.

To what extent can archives take advantage of the new opportunities arising from Linked Open Data? When is linking appropriate and what are the boundaries of appropriate linking. Where data is old, the potentials of linking and creating the semantic web of linked horizontal connections provides seemingly exiting exploration pathways. But when the data relates to you, me or people who are actively participants in our records, are the rules different? Who has the right to enable linking – and again, at what age of transaction or in what circumstances does this consideration impact. Public access to Commonwealth data is now typically available at 20 years after the transaction – but that is data potentially about each one of us. Should this be available for mashing, merging and linking? By third parties through scrapers of metadata? Should we be redefining our access regimes and rules not on age at all, but on personal vs other information. What is the limits of personal – is it the details of the person in the event logs (the recordkeeping process metadata) as well as the people involved in the substance of the transaction? The public concern expressed for privacy in the proposed retention of data from ISP and telephone companies in the recent inquiry into National Security legislation is about just this capacity to mine relationships, make connections and construct stories. The cry that its just metadata was a welcome addition of the word to the public sphere, but scary in that it revealed a significant technical naivety of our legislators.

Users of archives want the access to personal information, evidenced in the success of the new providers of aggregated access to archives – the genealogy technology companies such as Ancestry.com. We should be far more engaged and understanding of the possibilities and management of personal information. Traditional appraisal thinking has steered us away from considering case records or transactional records as the matter of archives. Yet it is just these records that are now within our technological competence to manage but we have no clear professional/socially acceptable articulation of our role in managing such personal information.

New ways of engaging with records, with public access across time and sites of access provision, the users and the people in records, are needed to reinvent our access practices now and into the future. Opportunities are presented to us, but we need to actively engage with multiple communities to work through managing just access to our archival holdings vs a more engaged access model suited to all environments.

Conceptually reconnecting the public access framework

⁴ Archivists in France Fight Privacy Initiative New York Times, 16 June 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/17/technology/archivists-in-france-push-against-privacy-movement.html?smid=tw-share&_r=0

Our access frameworks are fragmented almost beyond the capacity to recapture a cohesive framework for public access. This reflects the significant change from the situation where access was a privilege accorded under archives/public records legislation to the present situation where access, at least to personal information, is a right.

The UNESCO Declaration on Archives states 'Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life.'⁵ The open data movement most evident in access to public sector information initiatives advocates the future in data 'Data allows us to adapt and improve public services and businesses and enhance our whole way of life, bringing economic growth, wide-ranging social benefits and improvements in how government works.'⁶ The wave of reform of freedom of information or right to information legislation with its emphasis on proactive disclosure, following the wake of the UK initial impetus in this area puts the focus onto accountability and transparency of government information. While seemingly restricted to government institutions the trend to openness and reuse of data is to be seen in the vendor driven push for endless data retention under the rubric of big data and data mining into commercial organisations.

But all this is happening in fundamentally disconnected ways. As specific problems arise, new legislation is rushed forward to plug the gap. The access framework even for public institutions is actually contained in at least 4 different sets of legislation, and because this is largely a state based function, no consistency is apparent across jurisdictional boundaries. Worse, access to records living outside the archival organisation is subject to management from many disciplines essentially grappling for ascendancy – and the recordkeeping profession largely fails to be at the table, with a multitude of other information disciplines filling the gap.

So what are the opportunities for knitting the framework back together again? A conceptual picture of the landscape for both public and private organisations would be the first useful step. Identifying the many opportunities for connecting with information wherever it resides – not just within the walls of the institutional archives – is essential. This involves coming to grips with the reality of the distributed network of information that is the current technology environment we inhabit.

We need a coherent professional view about what the role of access is – what is the relation of the archive/s with the information technology reality we have in the slippery, ever changing technological omnipresence in which we operate. With the 'release' of public information all over the web, through legal means (such as proactive disclosure, open data publishing) or alternative means (such as leaking, exposures in WikiLeaks style journalism) what then is the role of the Archives – is it really restricted to considerations only to those things living inside the custodial walls of the institution? What role do/should the Archives have in relation to organisations such as the Internet Archive, or the concept of the web itself as the archives, and Google as the gateway to all archives. This is the early technology realisation of Derrida's 'all is archive' – what is our professional response?

⁵ UNESCO Universal Declaration on Archives <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002134/213423e.pdf>

⁶ Nicolas Shakespeare 'An independent review of public sector information' May 2013
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/198752/13-744-shakespeare-review-of-public-sector-information.pdf

We need to fight the fragmentation of access that is occurring within organisations too. The understandable emphasis on information security using standards such as ISO 27000 management standards are further pushing considerations of system security onto the contents of these systems – again clearly being seen from a specific technological point of view. This is indicative of the fragmentation of access/security within organisations which the emerging push to information governance (not data governance, not system governance) offers an opportunity for recordkeeping professionals to seize an active participation role – if we can skill up to take this role. And the construction of access within accepted regimes from the time of the records creation in a coherent fashion makes application with retroactive access a much less onerous task.

A focussing of the conceptual understandings and responsibilities for access will quickly reveal that public access, for government information at least, is not only happening in the reading room or via the archives email/interface. It is happening across organisations. We need to:

- connecting with the information disclosure or publication requirements under the various freedom of information regimes,
- incorporate published data into the archival interfaces (if not physically managing the information, providing the contextual layer at least),
- explore the capacity to link existing contextual information in archival systems for open data sets.

For example, rather than every individual department independently publishing lists of material opened under FOI like legislation, why could these not be considered differently: published not in a single lengthy list which meets the requirements of the law, but linked more specifically to the functions/activities represented on the organisational web page; or deposited with a central government data store, linked to the open data sets, and accompanied by the contextual information from archival control systems to promote their availability wherever required. The example of NSW State Records Digital Archives providing the NSW 'Publications' portal linked to their contextual descriptive system, Archives Investigator, provides a great proto-model for practical applications leading to a potential reconceptualising of the recordkeeping/archives role.

Exploring boundaries: digitisation=access; access=appraisal

Digitsation = Access

Within the workplace, potentially in the public mind, most obviously present in the work of digital humanities scholars at present, and rather disturbingly within archives institutions themselves, the simplification that digitisation=access is often sloppily to the fore. This needs to be broken apart and considered in detail. At the base of this is the transformation of format – from analogue to digital. Badly constructed digitisation projects are simply that – format transformation. Connected to thought out purposes, of course this format transformation enables connection to digital systems and quite radically different dissemination mechanisms does transform access – enabling multiple simultaneous users, not dependent on a physical location, with endless replicability at high quality.

'Clever photocopying' is one aspect. Converting to formats capable of digital manipulation is another. The assumption that the digital is now *the* record is disturbing. Actually the record remains the thing on which the business action was done. Different rules then apply depending on which

format is the record, and which is the copy. The proliferation of digitisation standards in all jurisdictions indicate that these concepts need articulation and that, generally speaking, the difference is not clearly understood.

The focus on digitisation as a dissemination technology is a great thing. But have we really understood the compromises that we are making in employing third party commercial arrangements that are commonly employed by archival institutions? Are we, in effect outsourcing our archives? The business model of compromising free access in return for the costs of digitisation must be a good thing in order to achieve the transformation of past paper records into digital surrogates. But the models and mechanisms in commercial exploitation should be subject to greater clarity and investigation to ensure that we are not fatally compromising the validity of the archives institution. Ancestry.com has become the archive for genealogists – and it has done a superb job, enabling access to multi-national resources through one interface. But is there an equivalence to our library colleagues who are increasingly finding the trade offs with publishers digital subscription models unpalatable? We've our own set of imposed conditions – such as only being able to provide free public access for a specific period bound to a physical location such as the reading room. What will happen in the 10 year restricted period? In this dynamic technical environment, is this too long to tie resources up? In what form will the eventually released material be held – you can bet that it won't have the clever multiply linked enhanced searching that is provided by the commercial providers.

Is the archives a physical location/repository as a defence against the encroaching non-physicality of the internet? Is it the physical thing, the repository of holdings rather than the provider of access? Can these roles be usefully separated? Are we setting ourselves up to fail, as we construct bespoke digital preservation programs focussing on small scale, hand crafted, usually format based preservation techniques?

And what of the assumption that this is digital recordkeeping? It kind of is, because once digital, the images and what metadata is constructed to surround them, do need to be managed as digital resources, but really this is not the same as managing the tsunami of born digital that are being created – but not transferred to archives – in creating agencies. And there are so many problems with continuing to conceptualise access to archives as solely through the prism of archival systems within the custodial walls. Many of the elements of the archival systems – the contextual, functional, structural provenance links essential to interpreting that information over time – are needed in organisations currently struggling to manage digital records. And are we managing digital records. The work of Frank Upward and colleagues is commencing a reconceptualization of recordkeeping as a component of appropriate management of any digital information. Recordkeeping informatics is a liberating conceptualisation, again allowing a dynamic space for professional interaction in workplaces beyond the narrow conceptualisation of EDRMS systems.

Access = appraisal

This equation invites exploration of the linkage between access and appraisal. The two professional practices should not be seen as completely independent. The pairing invites consideration of the reality that if records are only created if they are required for some form of future access. If records cannot be accessed, they might as well not exist. Similarly the reciprocal consideration is that records are created for the purpose of future access – whether that be in the doing of business, or

for longer term purposes. As argued in the accompanying 'Appraisal' paper, setting up records that will last for the time that they are needed, is a core recordkeeping endeavour requiring focus on metadata structures to capture the appropriate descriptive and contextual elements for their interpretation. But appraisal, particularly in the digital environment, is a continuous process, and the demands of technology dependent digital records require constant attention to this nexus of appraisal/access.

Defining infrastructure to address these issues – how well do our records/archives systems meet these requirements?

The role of the records/archives system comes under scrutiny whenever the adequacy of digital recordkeeping is discussed. Using the conceptual models inherent in our home grown Australian series system, records are surrounded by always expanding amounts metadata in multiple systems, reaching out to audiences from those within the organisation to those in the public sphere. The series system is conceptually based upon the idea of inheritance. We have lost this notion of linkage, inheritance and ever-growing metadata in the practicalities of our paper derived transfer protocols requiring box lists, manifests or transmission lists. Records cross custodial barriers as discrete objects, often without the rich metadata that surrounds their creation and management in creating systems.

Can we reclaim this idea of inheriting rich metadata, and what would happen if we could? Conceptually the building blocks are in place. Could we use archival contextual systems to link back to the front ends of agencies records on the web? What creative uses of the contextual metadata can be found/made?

Our rich conceptual metadata models are based on the notion of relationships – relationships both within records themselves in aggregating into multiple strings of transaction, and between core entities of people, business and records. Our practice in implementing these relationships has been lacking. Lacking in precision of definition of relationships – we are still largely working with paper based articulation of relationships, including the ubiquitous 'otherwise related' relationship clump. Relationships should prove a fertile ground for research and exploration. They potentially provide exploration of records transversely, vertically, and horizontally. Exposing and utilising relationships opens up new ways of exploiting records and it is highly compatible with the types of relationship linking on the web, yet within our own professional systems it is undervalued and underexploited. To build upon relationships these need to be separately identified and described, and then inherited by all subsequent systems managing the records. What opportunities exist in the world of the semantic web, and in Linked Open Data? The series system, and our multi-entity recordkeeping metadata standards with their relationship statements already providing the central structuring feature seem like an immediate fit with the expression of RDF tuples. Isn't this a machine representation format made for the series system? If this can be done from EAD descriptions in the UK – surely we can do it here.

This discussion presupposes that our descriptive systems are appropriate. Are they? This question is raised, appropriately, whenever public access is discussed. Archives and records systems are primarily devised on principles suited to our recordkeeping profession. We insist upon the centrality

of provenance and context entities such as agents and mandates. The often heard debate from newcomers to archives, particularly those from other information disciplines, is that this emphasis is inappropriate. Even Daniel Caron, late of Library and Archives Canada, has suggested that 'perhaps it would be easier, wiser and more logical simply to recognise and admit that provenance is an out-dated analogue concept which does not translate well to the digital infosphere of the computing cloud'⁷. Users, unless those seeped through training and use of archives, in our control systems, by and large hate out systems. Most recently, Zoe D'Arcy described observing users interact with Records Search at the National Archives of Australia being like 'watching a train wreck'⁸. Yet die hard archivists refuse to give up the notion of provenance and relationships. Why? What are the fundamental reasons for this and why is it so difficult to assert this without always having to reargue the case with professionals from different backgrounds.

One issue may well be that the early forms of automation of our records and archives systems essentially automated paper systems and the paper systems fundamentally served the professionals not the people/general users. So is one interpretation that we need to quite radically reconceptualise the user front end? And what would this look like?

The work of Dr Tim Sherratt and Dr Mitchell Whitelaw in providing different ways of engaging with collections is instructive. Visualisations as front ends? Why not? Why not enable relationships, already present in our systems, to be represented as pathways for user exploration? Our archival systems are loved by those involved in data hacks where the availability of such rich, complex and interesting public data is a treasure trove for experimentation – sometimes even linked to digital images. But are we really enabling ourselves to take advantage of such initiatives. The resulting apps are experiments, fragile and unsustainable in isolation. How can archival institutions harness the imaginative power of such work? And while we may be thrilled with such work, we should never forget that this is primarily about access to the metadata in the systems, and building multiple front ends is only possible because of the rich metadata in those systems. How can we use the exemplars to reconceive front end interfaces for the public? Can we reconceptualise access paths to all digital records within our jurisdictional scope using the same techniques?

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⁷ Daniel Caron 2012 2012 <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/news/speeches/Pages/reflections-evolution-appraisal-lac.aspx>

⁸ Tweet from Digital Treasures

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