

From Casanova to MoReq2010. Ages of Records

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ABSTRACT

It is a common place to talk about lifecycle of records or about ages of records. This is so common for all records management and archival practitioners that the sources and the rationale for such classifications are often forgotten. A review of origins for such approaches could be relevant today, not as a historical endeavor as such, but to understand the “why” and “for what purpose”. Starting from Casanova or Schellenberg, divisions in the life of records were made in order to facilitate their management, to reveal their ownership and to delineate organizational roles and responsibilities.

Therefore, the answers are important today because the technology of creating and keeping records is changed and the environment that led once to “cycles” and “ages” might have changed as well. In digital environment, it might be harder to differentiate between active and semi-active records; but is it still necessary to differentiate? And more, can we talk about digital records solely or the rule is rather hybrid archives?

This paper seeks to go through some conceptual facets of records and archives management, revealing some impacts on specialized software.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

Management; Documentation

General Terms

Management, Documentation

Keywords

records management; archives management; recordkeeping; e-records

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of recordkeeping, the records managers or archivists often relied upon technical professions for the activities of records preservation. In order to make sure that a vellum or a paper acting as a carrier, were still able to preserve the information recorded, they called the conservators or restaurateurs with their technical knowledge in the field. Today, for digital records, situation would be alike, unless the “technical staff” would not claim the recordkeeping positions too. Not seldom, some IT specialists today assert that there is no need for other information professionals, except for them, that librarians and archivists or records managers are about to disappear as professionals as long as THE tool will “replace” them all¹.

Far from aligning to such assumptions, the present paper seeks to analysis if the classical recordkeeping theory of the life of records is still valid and if the recordkeeping responsibilities associated will have any future at all.

2. RECORDS AND ARCHIVES. CYCLES AND AGES

Based on various experience and reasons, in continental Europe emerged a theory of “ages of archives”. That is an archive (seen as the whole of records belonging to one creating agency, not only historically records) is born, grows and dies. A very good description of this theory can be found in the famous Italian archivist Casanova’s book (1928). Casanova identifies “current”, “repository” and “general” archives². Archives, he claims, are, at the beginning, often use so they are kept in the office; this would be the current phase. After a period, they are moved into a repository, close enough for a possible use, but distant enough not to impede the current activity. And after another number of years, records are moved into general archives. The French archivists Yves Pérotin, wrote an article in a magazine about “les trois ages des Archives”(1962)³. He identified the “current archives”, “repository archives” and “archived archives” and it might be considered as the birth of the French archival classification in “archives courantes, intermédiaires et définitives”⁴.

The above system is largely used in Europe, with the notable exception of Germany. In this country, traditionally, records may have two “ages”⁵.

Based on German model⁶, also on Anglo-Saxons tradition of managing records and on U.S. NARS efforts in 1940s⁷, Th. Schellenberg made a flat separation in the ages of archives. In his approach, records are:

“All books, papers, maps, photographs, or other documentary materials, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received by any public or private institution in pursuance of its legal obligations or in connection with the transaction of its proper business and preserved or appropriate for preservation by that institution or its legitimate successor as evidence of its functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities or because of the informational value of the data contained therein”.

while archives are:

“Those records of any public or private institution which are adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution.”

Based on this separation he made, Schellenberg went deeper, identifying within “records age” stages of the records life-cycle:

“Records management is thus concerned with the whole life span of most records. It strives to limit their creation, and for this reason, one finds “birth control” advocates in the record management field as well as in the field of human genetics. It exercises a partial control over their current use. And it assists in determining which of them

should be consigned to the "hell" of the incinerator or the "heaven" of an archival institution, or, if perchance, they should first be held for a time in the "purgatory" or "limbo" of a record center."⁸

Since Schellenberg presentation, the life-cycle theory developed and evolved. A synthetic presentation of what life-cycle model means today would be the following:

*"In stage one, the record is created, presumably for a legitimate reason and according to certain standards. In the second stage, the record goes through an active period when it has maximum primary value and is used or referred to frequently by the creating office and others involved in decision making. During this time the record is stored on-site in the active or current files of the creating office. At the end of stage two the record may be reviewed and determined to have no further value, at which point it is destroyed, or the record can enter stage three, where it is relegated to a semi-active status, which means it still has value, but is not needed for day-to-day decision making. Because the record need not be consulted regularly, it is often stored in a off-site storage center. At the end of stage three, another review occurs, at which point a determination is made to destroy or send the record to stage four, which is reserved for inactive records with long-term, indefinite, archival value. This small percentage of records (normally estimated at approximately five per cent of the total documentation) is sent to an archival repository, where specific activities are undertaken to preserve and describe the records."*⁹

Instead of "life-cycles", some archivists pleaded for "continuum". One already classical article announcing a new theory came from Canada, from Jay Atherton¹⁰. A more articulated and profound elaboration of the continuum theory came from Australia, and mainly from research team in Monash University. Beyond awarding to Atherton the first use of term and idea of unification, the Australians' theory of continuum had such a great impact, that many tends to grant them the privilege of foundation for this approach¹¹. The main features of the theory was presented in two articles of Frank Upward¹², in 1996-1997, but 1—the ferment of this theory came from Australian archival practice¹³ and 2—the articulation of theory was the result of the efforts of Records Continuum Research Group at Monash University¹⁴.

As it is known today, records continuum is defined as "[T]he whole extent of a record's existence; refers to a consistent and coherent regime of management processes from the time of creation of records (and before creation, in the design of recordkeeping systems), through to the preservation and use of records as archives."¹⁵

The "ages" and "cycles" approaches were formulated in full paper era, where records were mainly paper based and alternative media (although also analogical) were not so relevant. The continuum model was developed later, in the dawn of digital area. This chronology might led to the assumption that is an issue of modernity and actuality over the two. In fact, a more deeply analysis proves that previous assumption is not exact. In a study of InterPARES¹⁶, these two main approaches were named as: *Chain of Preservation Model* (for the "ages" approach) and *Business-driven Recordkeeping Model* (for continuum). That is, in a broader framework, the first model focuses on preservation and marks distinctly the phases and (implicitly) responsibilities built in these phases. Resulting from practical experiences, each stage marked a

change of preservation space for records, a change of responsibility, a change of finding aids, in many situations. In the first age or stage of life, records are created in the registries or in offices. The responsibility for maintaining records is the task of workers, and records are housed in the offices; varying from country to country, one may found a record-level registration. In the semi-active stage (and intermediate archives), the records managers is in charge with the folders received from creating offices. Often, the "finding aids" is at series or at folder level, and they are preserved outside of regular "production space", in a central repository of the organisation. In the inactive stage, records became inactive and records managers and/or archivists may start appraise "stuff". While cycle is closed, the age theory goes further, for defining the "definitive archives" that falls under archivists' jurisdiction and in the archival repositories.

Not on the contrary, but from a different perspective, the records continuum pays least attention to preservation, emphasizing creation, aggregation and use of information, stressing the need for preparing the future management of records (in different respects) by harvesting meta-information even from the first phase. E. Shepherd and G. Yeo notices that the new interpretation of records life seen as a continuum is the abstraction of it, arguing that "[s]pecific practices will vary from one working context to another, but models based on the lifecycle concept or the entity life history can help to identify stages and actions within a records management programme, and thus provide a useful framework for planning and implementation."¹⁷

3. DIGITAL RECORDS: NEW APPROACHES OR ONLY ADJUSTED ONES?

But how these model apply to digital world of records today? Is there any relevancy for a life cycle or we only have large systems that deals with everything? Can we speak indeed of the dead of records cycles and responsibilities for manager/archivist, melting everything under information governance umbrella?

In my opinion, it is obvious that the classic records and archival manager bearings are (if not already) to change. Despite a hybrid environment today that might still accommodate old fashion professionals, the new technology for creating and managing records triggered a change in competencies and responsibilities of recordkeeping professionals. The records manager today does not care to move pillars of folders from offices to repository; all of them are in the IT system, and one can hardly say the difference active/semi-active unless the system notified. That is, the role of the records manager shifted from acting in the course of the lifecycle of records to delivering the input at the beginning (in designing/setting requirements for the system) and at the end of the lifecycle. And this apparently makes the lifecycle itself meaningless.

I said *apparently* because this linear course of action can be undermined by the lifecycle of technology. As MoReq2010 outlines and specifies, in digital environment there is a lifecycle of technology, and one may wonder if this is not the new cycle of records too. MoReq2010 is the only specification strongly emphasizing the need for exportation of records out of a system, in order to avoid the technological obsolescence. I believe that we shifted from records-based cycle to technology-based cycles and we should map the responsibilities of paper record managers to the one's belonging to new... e-records manager.

One cycle is over, but... will all the information be migrated? Yes, the regulations might say so, the standards might say so, but what the budgets will say? Shall the organizations pay for transferring of non-operative information only because the best practices or even the need for history will say so? Doubtfully, considering what they did with paper records. This is why the paper based records were often associated with dark, dusted cellars, because of the “great” concern and care of the organizations for their records... As we already know, since the paper records are more resilient than digital records in case of abandonment, I consider this new cycle is one that records manager should observe carefully, in order to attempt at least a documented set-aside of those records, if their fully transfer into a new system will not be possible. A fully managed life of e-records would be magnificent, but so it would have been with paper records; unfortunately, there was rarely so. Very nice standards get out of the laboratory or records/information thinkers, but I think we should wait for real-life situations, for instance where disposition of out-of-system e-records would be attempted, to see then how this can be really made. How records from 20 years ago will be appraised, at file/folder/class level since they are not migrated to new platforms?¹⁸ Above all, how it will be managed?

Another strong issue in these years is the advent of long digital preservation. Following the famous Jeff Rothenberg’s saying¹⁹, such systems seems more and more necessary not only for historical archives, but also for what was considered as semi-active or inactive records. In such circumstances, some argued that the archivists missions is over, since the creators themselves assure the long term preservation. Why should we need archives since, mostly in a post-custodial paradigm, institutions and companies keeps and maintain their records?

A first remark on this would say that this approach is not new. Historically speaking, even such technological shift did not probably exist, it was a shift of knowledge or a shift of mandate. When chancelleries moved from Latin language to national ones, in one or two generations all the past records became a bunch of useless papers, completely not understandable for regular people. Those records were not an information asset anymore, as long as they were intellectually inaccessible. Also, when modern institutions appeared, it was a look towards the future, not to the past; the administrative rules were changed, so the information in old records were also useless, from organizational points of view. In most cases, this is how National Archives were founded, as a state repository for the production-useless papers that might, however, be still interesting from a cultural point of view. How can be an assurance that such a scenario is not repeatable? How can somebody know that a public organization will pay for ever to maintain on long term its “historically” records/information, and not decide at a given moment to move them elsewhere, if society will still consider them relevant from a cultural point of view? In my opinion, nor just it might happen, but this is the most realistic scenario. And then the archivists (or their equivalent) will face exactly the same challenges as today: not one schema for the arrangement or description of records, but hundreds; not one process documented, but thousands; not several type of records, but millions. It would be very nice to hear about some experiences of moving many huge database to National Archives, with different structures, different data types and different triggers and behaviors. How this will be dealt with? And in this case, of course the original metadata would not be enough, of course the archivists will need to document more of their actions, of the context, on the provenance etc. Maybe the actual archivists will be overrun by the task, but have no doubt that it will be a need for e-archivists in the future.

A final issue I would like to address is the need for a mixture between different types of information systems. I would like to stress that I do not believe that system that can combine all recordkeeping functionalities at a reasonable price can exist. Or, at least, not now. Or, at least, not affordable for everybody. Therefore, we are still sentenced to have production system (ECM, EDMRS, CRM etc.) and preservation systems (like OAIS compliant products). Also, as the myth of paperless office is waiting yet to come true, the rule seems more and more the existence of a hybrid management systems, for paper and e-records. Since the new cycles of life determined by technology status is somewhere between 5-10 years, and the retention periods of records may go over this period, it is clear that a long time preservation systems should have hybrid records management functionalities, since not all the records in such a system should be kept “forever” and such a system should deal with retention periods and dispositions in due time. As far as I studied the different system on the market, the producers are only concern about offering a “permanent” life for digital assets, even if they would only need, let’s say, 50 years...

4. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the models for life of records and responsibilities of recordkeeping professionals from the paper world are not necessary obsolete ones, but they (will) suffer a change in meaning, being more and more substantiate as a technological phase in the existence of records and not a simple management one. Due to limited technological cycles, some of the task belonging to archivists-of-the-past (in term of long time preservation) might rely on records/information-managers-of-the-present. On the other time, the tasks of archivists/information-manager-of-the-past might keep being the collection of various sources of information asset, as today, adding new metadata, documenting provenance. Therefore, I truly believe that, with the mandatory skills on IT, the specialists in recordkeeping will have a job to do in the future.

5. REFERENCES

- ¹ For me, a relevant expression would be even the present publication guidelines that seemed to be dedicated to technical papers only (see, for instance, the index based on *Computing Classification Index*).
- ² E. Casanova, *Archivistica*, Siena, 2nd ed., 1928, pp. 21-23.
- ³ Yves Pérotin, *L’administration et les trois âges des archives*, in « Seine et Paris », no. 20, octobre 1961 (excerpt), p. 4.
- ⁴ See, in this respect, *Manuel d’archivistique*, Paris, 1970, p. 122.
- ⁵ Luciana Duranti, *Archives as a Place*, in “Archives and Manuscripts”, vol. 24, No. 2, p. 249. The same in Hungary, see *A szocialista országok jelenkori levéltári terminológiájának szótára*, Budapest, 1988.
- ⁶ Luciana Duranti, *Archives...*, p. 249.
- ⁷ Sue McKemmish, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: A Continuum of Responsibility*, first published in *Proceedings of the Records Management Association of Australia 14th National Convention*, 15-17 Sept 1997, RMAA Perth 1997, 1997. Online at: <http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/recordscontinuum-smckp2.html>
- ⁸ All quotes were from Th. Schellenbeg, *Modern Archives*, Chicago, 1956, p. 37-38.
- ⁹ Philip C. Bantip, *Strategies for managing electronic records: a new Archival paradigm? An affirmation of our archival traditions?*, p. 3 at <http://www.indiana.edu/~libarch/ER/macpaper12.pdf>. This general presentation may fit in most of the cases, but the way stages and other accompanying details are arranged may differ. See Ira

Penn, Gail Pennix, Jim Coulson, *Records Management Handbook*, Cambridge, 1994, p. 13; E. Shepherd, G. Yeo, *Managing records. A handbook of principles*, Facet Publishing, 2003, p.8; James B. Rhoads, *The Role of Archives and Records Management in National Information Systems: A RAMP Study*, Paris, 1983, p. 2; Jay Atherton, *From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management-Archives Relationship*, in “Archivaria” 21 (Winter 1985-86), p. 44.

¹⁰ Atherton, *op.cit.*, p. 48.

¹¹ See, for instance, Shepherd, Yeo, *op.cit.*, p.9.

¹² Frank Upward, *Structuring the Records Continuum - Part One: Postcustodial principles and properties*, in “Archives and Manuscripts”, 24 (2) 1996 (online at <http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/recordscontinuum-fupp1.html>); idem, *Structuring the Records Continuum, Part Two: Structuration Theory and Recordkeeping*, in “Archives and Manuscripts”, 25 (1) 1997 (online at <http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/recordscontinuum-fupp2.html>)

¹³ .McKemmish, *loc.cit.*

¹⁴ <http://john.curtin.edu.au/society/australia/>

¹⁵ Original Australian definition in AS 4390:1996, Part 1, 4.22.

¹⁶ Luciana Duranti and Randy Preston (eds.), *International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES) 2: Experiential, Interactive and Dynamic Records*, Padova, 2008.

¹⁷ Shepherd, Yeo, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁸ This is in fact the main vulnerability of many standards and regulation in the area. No matter how important an information can be as an asset, information a perishable product; hence, its cost of maintain and managing should be justified. Over-regulation in the field of RM (which, whatever is said, is a supporting process) would only lead to a risk-based examination and, I am afraid, to an almost full rejection of best-practices if they are too costly. And technologies for managing e-records over time are (yet) really costly...

¹⁹ “Digital objects last forever—or five years, whichever comes first”. It was mathematically and funny represented as $\min(\infty, 5)$.