

SHIFTING CONCEPTUAL CONSTRUCTIONS IN ARCHIVAL SCIENCE AN INTRODUCTION

Greg Rolan

Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Let me say from the outset that I feel particularly privileged to have been asked to introduce and comment on the papers presented at the opening of the conference and school. The topic for that first session was titled ‘Shifting Conceptual constructions in Archival science’, but perhaps *shifting* is too weak a word for what the presentations actually convey. Both Professor Anne Gilliland’s *Reframing archival understandings of authority, provenance, authenticity, and evidence in support of humanitarianism* and Assistant Professor Giovanni Michetti’s *From the principle of provenance to the provenance ontology* upend traditional notions of archival conceptualisation — albeit from different perspectives. I think *disruptive* would be a better word to describe the effect of the phenomena being addressed in these papers.

The topic suggests that we are at the tipping point of the sociomateriality of recordkeeping; sociomateriality being the entanglement of the social and technical, of agency and artefact.¹ Both authors suggest that we need ask ourselves some fundamental, existential questions. What (and who)

1 Dubravka Cецez-Kecmanovic, Robert D. Galliers, Ola Henfridsson, Sue Newell, and Richard Vidgen, “The sociomateriality of information systems: Current status, future directions,” *MIS Quarterly*, 38:3 (2014), 809-830.

are records actually for? What is it that recordkeepers should be doing? What is it that our systems – and by systems I mean the complete socio-material framework of theory, principles, policy, standards, participants, and workflows, as well as technical systems and interfaces – need to be able to do? In the words of Gilliland, “what business are archives in today”? These issues affect the very core of what we, as archivists or recordkeepers understand our mission to be. And, as both authors point out, it is considerably more than simply arrangement and description. These ideas aren’t new, given the historical perspectives provided by both authors, but from both papers we can draw the conclusion that there are a number of factors that give them a new urgency.

To me, what both authors are arguing is that we are witnessing a breakdown of traditional recordkeeping paradigms. In some ways this is unsurprising. If we accept that recordkeeping is a reflection of society; and society is being disrupted in various social and technical ways, then we would hardly expect our recordkeeping to remain static. So then, what is changing? Where is the disruption coming from?

Internet commentator Clay Shirky explored this phenomenon several years ago. In his book *Here comes everybody*,² Shirky describes a number of emergent trends; remembering, of course, that one of the key attributes of a sociomaterial perspective is recognition of the emergent nature of related phenomena. Shirky describes how the dis-intermediation of web technologies has led to emergent social phenomena affecting power structures, economics, and even the constitution of community:

- from simplistic hierarchies to complex networks,
- from the centre to the periphery, and
- from products to process.

It is also interesting to note that Shirky published this before the mobile and cloud phenomena really took off. Anyway, how does this shift from the centre to the edge; from hierarchies to networks; from product to process play out in the recordkeeping world? To begin with, Gilliland brings in to sharp relief the issues of “survival, resettlement and recovery

2 Clay Shirky, *Here comes everybody* ([London]: Allen Lane, 2008).

of those displaced through violence or environmental, economic or other exigencies” and the major disparities between the “bureaucratic and legal record” on the one hand and the “human and humanitarian record” on the other.

Similarly, Michetti points out that, not only is there a disruption coming, not only from the digitisation of recordkeeping, but from a shift of orientation from institutional to networked infrastructure. Michetti’s discussion of issues of trust when “documents on the Internet [...] can be de- and re-contextualized with little attention to their authenticity” echoes Gilliland’s proposition that, as recordkeepers, we are now confronted with “irregular records and regular records that are used in irregular ways” — none of which may necessarily result from malicious intent, but from the sociomaterial adaptation to the changing nature of society and technology.

I would like to advance the proposition that what we are experiencing is the confluence of three interdependent factors: The growing volume of records (confounded by the multiple ways in which they can be comprehended); the growing effects of national and international social disruption; and the disrupting effects of emergent networked and digital technologies. One of these ‘disturbances in the force’ would be sufficient to give the recordkeeping community a headache. That all three are manifesting simultaneously presents us with a wicked problem; a grand challenge.³ For those of us involved in the development of recordkeeping infrastructure, or the sociomaterial conceptualisations that underpin such infrastructure, these are fundamental questions indeed. And, as Susan Leigh Star argues, if infrastructure is an embodiment of standards⁴ then, if we don’t get our standards (or our conceptualisations) right, we will never get to the infrastructure that we need.

Maybe standards and policy setting bodies aren’t the best mechanisms through which this can be achieved. Perhaps we need to re-imagine how

3 Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemish, “Recordkeeping Metadata, the Archival Multiverse, and Societal Grand Challenges,” in *Proc. Int’l Conf on Dublin Core and Metadata Applications 2012*, <http://dcevents.dublincore.org/IntConf/dc-2012/paper/viewPaper/108>.

4 Susan Leigh Star, *Got infrastructure? How standards, categories, and other aspects of infrastructure influence communication* (2002), oai:CiteSeerX.psu:10.1.1.19.7523.

we do our definitional work – though, as Gilliland points out, nailing down concepts is not a trivial task. Rather, it may be that we need to embrace the disruption and move power out from the centre to the edge of the network, while acknowledging and, hopefully, mitigating the risks that Michetti describes. The World Wide Web ecosystem has grown explosively, not through centralised committees, but from agile and responsive networks of people, trying to solve their local problems, while realising that interoperability is a first-class priority. If you aren't interoperable you aren't in the network and as power shifts to the edge, you're going to be left behind. Perhaps we need to think about standards less as products and more as processes, how we arrive at consensus, what's the minimum that we need to ensure that the network works? How do we allow and ensure that the network evolves?

How we do this is very difficult. And, as both authors argue, the solutions may well run counter to much of what we've been taught and tried to practice. But I trust that audience for these papers comprises really smart people who understand the issues and can conceive of pathways to approach this wicked problem. It's up to you to make it so.