CHAPTER 1

Records and archives: concepts, roles and definitions

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1 Introduction

Recordkeeping, as with other practice-based professions, involves substantial interplay between thinking and doing, between concept and practice. This chapter considers some of the underpinning concepts that support records and archives management, together with the degree to which they may – or may not be – directly applied in practice. It will look both at the roles of records and archives and at their influences upon individuals, organizations and society; and at interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary discussions about the nature and definitions of records and archives. As the literature that supports an understanding of these issues is examined it will become clear that thinking about such issues is not only forever evolving, but is engaging ever wider types of contributors and audiences.

It appears that perspectives on the multiple concepts and roles of records and archives and of their characteristics are proliferating, both within and beyond the recordkeeping profession. The ubiquitous nature and effects of technology; the consolidation of practices relating to governance, accountability and risk; the imperatives of freedom of information and data security; increasing adoption of ‘the archive’ by academic and creative disciplines; political and social imperatives for archives within cultural and heritage environments; philosophical debates – still largely influenced by postmodernism; and a shift from an ‘expert’ to a ‘crowd-sourced’ knowledge base ensure that lively discussions continue to contribute to an already solid base of understanding.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to explore all these influences in depth.
but, rather, to focus on the role of records and archives for individuals, organizations and society; their nature, definition and development; and the interaction of concept and practice. It will also demonstrate that concepts can have value even when they have no apparent direct practical application, not least in informing one’s own professional knowledge base.

2 Records and archives: for individuals, organizations and society

Records have always had a range of meanings: they mean different things to different people. We ‘look’ at records in different ways, depending on what we want to find. This is not quite the same as saying that records have always had a range of uses (Craven, 2008, 16–17), but this also is true. When records are created it is generally for a specific purpose or function but, having been created, they develop the capacity to be used and perceived in a multitude of ways and to carry a multitude of meanings. In commenting on the roles of records McKemmish (2005, 15) argues that

Records have multiple purposes in terms of their value to an individual, organization or society. They are vehicles of communication and interaction, facilitators of decision-making, enablers of continuity, consistency and effectiveness in human action, memory stores, repositories of experience, evidence of rights and obligations. On a darker note, they can also be instruments of repression and abuse of power.

Here we shall consider some of the similarities and differences between the records and archives that relate to, or are generated by, individuals and organizations, and their impact on society at large.

2.1 Individuals

Boundaries between the records of individuals, organizations and wider society are inevitably blurred, but some distinctive roles or purposes of records can be defined for each. The records we, our families, friends and acquaintances, as individuals, create and keep, or that are created about us, affect all our personal states – emotional, financial, legal, employment, identity, citizenship and so on. Personal narratives such as diaries, memoirs
or autobiographies, correspondence and photographs reflect the details of a life lived, and their significance for personal meaning and memory may be profound. Fewer emotional connotations may be attached to the kinds of records required for conducting one’s life effectively, but the consequences of failing to keep the evidence of financial, property, insurance and employment transactions efficiently, for example, could also be devastating. Personal vital documents (i.e. relating to life) such as passports, an example of those records of registration that connect individuals to the state, not only provide government with data from which to develop national policy and financial planning but directly impinge on people’s access to citizenship and identity.

There have been accusations that recordkeepers (both records managers and archivists) have in the past paid less attention to personal records than to organizational ones. This was first highlighted by Australians Sue McKemmish (1996) and Adrian Cunningham (1996), who argued that there had been a failure to develop appropriate archival methodologies for managing personal papers partly because these were frequently deposited in and managed by libraries rather than archives. They suggested that it would be useful to employ the recordkeeping practices that were applied to the records of organizations to personal records as well, for example in relation to their arrangement and description. This essentially practical discussion evolved into a postmodern or poststructuralist debate between South African archivist Verne Harris (2001) and Upward and McKemmish (2001) not only about the nature of evidence left by individuals, but about the very personal effect that individual recordkeepers themselves have on the materials they manage. In Canada Catherine Hobbs (2001; 2010) has made the case for further developing understanding of personal records, emphasizing their differences when compared with the records of organizations, a theme which is taken up in some UK writing (Williams, 2008). While it might be desirable to apply the appraisal, arrangement, descriptive or other recordkeeping methodologies that work so well with organizational records to personal records, the often idiosyncratic, unstructured and unique content and context of the latter make these sometimes difficult to apply fully. The issue of personal recordkeeping is clearly linked to interests in genealogy and broader questions of identity, the latter a theme taken up in a range of conferences and publications (e.g. Kaplan, 2000).
2.2 Organizations

The successful operation of organizations (from governments to golf clubs) is equally dependent on the ability to create, keep and manage records and other kinds of information effectively. Imagine how a pharmaceutical company operates. Its ability to generate and access relevant information enables the ongoing operation, development and revision of its specific products and supports and informs future decision making. If these systems were not robust its exposure to risk would be greatly enhanced. Protection against legal or other challenges – made by auditors, clients or members of the public for example – is dependent on the creation of and ready access to those records that provide accurate evidence of its activity in specific instances. All organizations are accountable to their stakeholders, whether these are shareholders, citizens or employees. These bodies can provide evidence of accountability through records that show compliance with all necessary legal, fiscal, audit and other regulatory requirements. Accountability is linked to transparency: the more widely available the evidence of such compliance, the more transparent – and accountable – the organization.

The role of records and recordkeeping in organizations is supported in a variety of standards and literature. The key international standard, ISO 15489-1:2001 Information and Documentation: Records management (ISO, 2001), has been adopted in many Anglophone countries. Originally based on the Australian Records Management Standard, Part 1 of the standard comprises general information regarding records management requirements, including the characteristics of records; design and implementation of records systems; and records management processes and controls. Part 2 provides implementation guidelines, a methodology and an overview of the processes required for compliance with Part 1. Another international standard, ISO 14721:2003 Space Data and Information Transfer Systems – Open Archival Information Systems – Reference Model (ISO, 2003) is a core standard for managing digital data of all kinds and is being increasingly widely used by recordkeepers. There exists a range of textbooks on records management in the UK and elsewhere (for example, Shepherd and Yeo, 2003; McLeod and Hare, 2005; Bawden and Robinson, 2012; Bailey, 2008; Choksy, 2006). In addition, records managers need to be familiar with texts relating to allied information and data management disciplines and to the management of digital data, since many of the types of data and respective challenges and
solutions overlap. In areas of governance such issues as data privacy, freedom of information, legal admissibility of information, information assurance and security and information risk are a key concern for recordkeepers and a central feature of their daily work.¹

2.2.1 Use and reuse of records

The ongoing use and reuse of records and information either because they continue to have value as evidence or because they have developed a new purpose or use (such as freedom of information or archival information requests) may be a key concern both for the creating organization and for external parties. The management of organizations’ archives either in-house or by national, local, business, university, charitable or other collecting archives ensures their continued accessibility to a wide range of audiences. As Shepherd and Yeo (2003, xii) note:

Outside the organisation, the wider community also has expectations that records should be kept. When records are used for purposes of accountability they are not merely supporting organisational needs for compliance or self-defence, they also meet the requirements of society for transparency and the protection of rights. Other organisations and individuals may use records for historical, demographic, sociological, medical or scientific research. Records kept for cultural purposes also serve the values of society and its need for collective memory.

Organizations’ archival records can be supported and maintained by any of a range of organizational models. Where an organization has no interest in the permanent preservation of its records/information/data as archives, recordkeeping supports solely current business needs. Some organizations have an integrated records and archives management set-up that provides a continuum of care for their own current and archival material. Other organizations outsource the management of their archives or hold them offsite – an arm’s-length solution. Where the link between an organization and its archives has been broken, specific archival institutions take on the role of archival preservation, with a collecting remit embracing geographical, topical, biographical or other areas of interest (further discussed in Williams, 2006a, 35–49). Such institutions are also likely to
receive the archives of their own parent body, and their role is to ensure the effective acquisition, description, promotion, access and dissemination of information about their holdings to a range of publics. There is a selection of literature available to those responsible for the management of archives; unlike in organizational recordkeeping, archival standards tend to be issued by professional rather than international or national standards organizations. The International Council on Archives (ICA) has produced four key descriptive standards (ICA, 2000; 2004; 2007; 2008), translated into some twelve languages; in addition a range of Anglophone textbooks (Williams, 2006a; Millar, 2010; Hunter, 2003; Bettington et al., 2008) are available.

2.3 Society
Beyond the individual and the organization, understanding the numerous roles of archives and records in ‘society’ is a complex matter touching on many areas of human life. Tom Nesmith (2010) comments:

If you ask most Canadians what links the pursuit of Nazi criminals, climatology, Alzheimer’s research, Aboriginal land claims, LSD medical experiments, chemical warfare experiments, unsolved murders from the American civil rights era, South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Stasi secret police, Japanese wartime compensation … few would answer archives …

Nesmith is focusing here on the role of archives in informing public policy, as do Johnson and Williams (2011). In addition to this and to the role of records and archives in helping people to understand past activity there are many other aspects of their interaction with society that have been readily seized upon by a number of writers within and beyond the recordkeeping profession. These aspects include the contribution of archives to issues of memory, accountability and social justice (Jimerson, 2009; Procter et al., 2005); societies’ relationships with their records in a range of cultural, organizational and historical contexts (McKemmish et al., 2005); the connections between archives, justice and political power (Harris, 2002; 2005); the role of archives in memory and forgetting (Ketelaar, 2001; 2002; Schwarz and Cook, 2002; Blouin and Rosenberg, 2007); supporting democracy, human rights and recordkeeping in areas of conflict and truth
and reconciliation (Peterson, 2005; Adami and Hunt, 2010); the effects of colonization on the colonized and their records (Bastian, 2003); and the growing involvement of local communities in generating and maintaining their own archives (Flinn, 2011). The literature noted here is a small example of writing largely by both professional and academic recordkeepers – a counter perhaps to those who continue to criticize the profession for its lack of engagement in wider intellectual issues. It also provides examples of how these writers’ engagement in their particular areas of employment has impelled them to write about the wider effect of their experiences.

3 Interdisciplinary approaches to records and archives
Notions of ‘the archive’ have been seized or borrowed and developed by a wide range of disciplines as they experience an ‘archival turn’, and claim ‘the archive’ as a central hypothesis ‘upon which to fashion their perspectives on human knowledge, memory and power’.2 There are many descriptions of this, including Buchanan (2011) and Schwarz and Cook (2002). Considered to derive initially from Derridean and Foucaultian studies, the effect has been noted, for example, by McDonald (1996), Manoff (2004), Foster (2004), Spieker (2008), Mereweather (2006) and Magee and Waters (2011) in sociology, law, philosophy, political science, literary studies, anthropology, classics, cultural history and performance and visual art. Frequently highlighted are the writings of cultural historians such as Carolyn Steedman (2007), who has worked extensively in archives and record offices. She injects a note of reality into Derrida’s well-known notion of ‘archive fever’ (Derrida, 1995), claiming that it bears little relation to the reality of archives and archival research. She argues that Derrida is anyway not just referring to archives and that his ‘archive fever’ is simply ‘a metaphor capacious enough to encompass the whole of modern information technology, its storage, retrieval, and communication’ (Steedman, 2007, 4). Steedman’s own experience of archive fever occurs when she is visiting an archive or record office, and includes being faced with ‘the great brown, slow-moving strandless river of Everything, and then there is its tiny flotsam that has ended up in the record office you are at work in’ (Steedman, 2007, 18).

New terminologies are developing too, some of which may seem alien to recordkeepers. Manoff (2004, 11) notes that scholars from various disciplines have brought into the vocabulary such terms as the ‘social
archive’, the ‘raw archive’, the ‘imperial archive’, the ‘postcolonial archive’, the ‘popular archive’, ‘the ethnographic archive’, the ‘geographical archive’, the ‘liberal archive’, ‘archival reason’, ‘archival consciousness’, ‘archive cancer’, and the ‘poetics of the archive’ as legitimate subjects of study. These may not be terms that we come across on a daily basis, but it is useful to be aware of them – and to be aware too that it is a two-way process, with recordkeepers also contributing to the discussion. Ketelaar (2001, 31) notes that recordkeepers too are exploring a multiplication of perspectives. They are learning (or relearning) from anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, cultural and literary theorists: to look up from the record and through the record, looking beyond – and questioning – its boundaries, in new perspectives seeing with the archive (to use Tom Nesmith’s magnificent expression), trying to read its tacit narratives of power and knowledge.

In practical terms, closer to home are those disciplines – sometimes referred to as ‘fields of study’ in acknowledgement of the fuzziness of disciplinary boundaries – that lie adjacent to our own and with which we do need to be familiar if we are to develop and broaden our own knowledge and skills. Bawden and Robinson’s statements about information management emphasize the clear commonalities with records and archives management:

Information management is a complicated subject, and can be understood in different ways. Sometimes it is understood as a wide and all-embracing concept, including records management, knowledge management, library management and so on, and sometimes with a much narrower focus.

(Bawden and Robinson, 2012, 3)

And:

We focus on the ideas that recorded information, instantiated in documents, can be understood as a resource … that information has a value … and that information management processes can be related to … communication chains and information lifecycles …

(Bawden and Robinson, 2012, 252)
Information scientists define their discipline (alongside other definitions) as:

the science and practice dealing with the effective collection, storage, retrieval and use of information. It is concerned with recordable information and knowledge, and the technologies and related services that facilitate their management and use.

(Bawden and Robinson, 2012, 2)

To many, particularly to those at the ‘records’ end of the spectrum, it would make more sense for recordkeepers to align – and indeed integrate – directly with such a field of study. It is undoubtedly important to make links and to work alongside fellow information professionals whenever this can help to support and develop our services.

4 Defining records and archives

How are records and archives themselves actually defined? In general, as was inferred above, the term ‘records’ is applied to the output of individuals’ and organizations’ current operational processes and activities, while ‘archives’ is usually reserved for those records that are also available for use for additional purposes, including historical and other research. However, the fact that there is no clear distinction between the two (even if the role of the recordkeeper as either archivist or records manager is more clearly defined) will be discussed below. Associated terms, such as information and data will also be considered.

A definition is designed to explain the meaning of a word or phrase and thus to help us to understand concepts, their application and use. Definitions are essential for recordkeeping practitioners for purposes of communication with others, consistency of practice and decision making in the workplace. They help us to explain to interested parties what we do, to guide and instruct colleagues and to identify where our own professional boundaries lie in relation to those of others. If there is no consensus for example on the definition of a file or an evidence of title, then there can be no agreement about how to manage them either. However, the value of definitions – or, rather, the ‘definitiveness’ of definitions – has been challenged by the loosely postmodern notion that it is impossible to proclaim an objective truth about the thing being defined, because all
meaning is relative, defined by experience and contingent on language and context. Despite this complication, definitions continue to be supplied in dictionaries, encyclopaedias, professional glossaries and standards in support of practice, alongside a general acceptance that there may be many readings and interpretations of specific terms and concepts. Analysis demonstrates that practitioners (as well as postmodern philosophers) have generated a range of different definitions, based on their own practical requirements; relativism at work in practice as well as theory.3

4.1 The variety of definitions
We must therefore accept that definitions are never ‘definitive’. Accepting this premise, however, need not detract from the significance and usefulness of definitions: indeed it enables us to think more broadly about their interpretation. Interest in the characterization of records and archives exists both within and beyond the recordkeeping disciplines. Glossaries show that a ‘record’ to a computer scientist is a group of fields within a table and database; to a lawyer it is a financial document or an account of proceedings in a case; to a telecommunications officer it is the unit of data that is transmitted from sender to receiver. ‘Archives’ may be used to refer to anything (and not just documents) that is old or that needs to be saved: digital performance archives, linguistic archives, toys archives and peat bogs as biological archives are all in the frame. In the recordkeeping disciplines of records management, archives management and the allied areas of information management, data management, knowledge management, library management, museum and heritage management there may be some professional disagreement about what precisely is meant by a ‘record’. Yeo (2007, 318) notes that

those whose understanding has been shaped by an archival education are likely to emphasize the roles of evidence, contextual provenance, integrity and authenticity; those whose background is in information management see records primarily as information assets for government or corporate business; while those brought up in what may loosely be called the ‘manuscript’ tradition tend to view them as quasibibliographic materials.

Given that there are so many parties with an interest in definitions, it is not
surprising therefore that they have been produced by individuals from a range of recordkeeping environments. The earliest published definitions were largely the products of national and state archives. Those of Muller, Feith and Fruin (1898) in the Netherlands, Hilary Jenkinson (1965) in England in 1922, Eugenio Casanova (1928) in Italy, Adolf Brenneke (1953) in Germany and Theodore Schellenberg (1956) in the USA focused largely on records as products of governance.4

4.1.1 Professional and academic contributions
From the 1960s professional associations began to produce definitions, an indicator perhaps of their developing maturity. The Society of American Archivists, Association of Records Managers and Administrators, the ICA and the UK Information and Records Management Society (IRMS) continue to produce definitions and glossaries to support members and practitioners.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, as recordkeeping became a subject of (largely graduate) study, academics, many of whom had practical experience, challenged the rather pragmatic assumptions that had been made to date. David Bearman and Richard Cox in the USA, Luciana Duranti, Terry Cook and Tom Nesmith in Canada, Chris Hurley, Sue McKemmish, Frank Upward and Adrian Cunningham in Australia and Michael Cook in the UK are representatives of early discussions in Anglophone countries. Here definitions were derived from conceptual underpinnings – that is, observations based on the analysis of a range of examples and uses – rather than resulting directly from a single practical instance.

A recent example of an academic contribution is that of Yeo (2008), who turns to other disciplines – in this case psychology and sociology – for insights into the nature of records. Here the concepts of prototypes and ‘boundary objects’ have been used to conceptualize records. A prototype is envisaged as a mental mapping of the typical features of something: typical features of a bird might be feathers, beak, ability to fly and build nests, and any candidate claiming membership of the ‘bird’ category might, in simple terms be expected to display these features: a non-prototypical one might not be able to fly, while still being admissible to the category, for example. A prototypical record may display attributes recognized in different degrees by different communities, while non-prototypical ones may align to a greater or lesser extent.
Having explored these ideas, Yeo (2008, 122) concludes: ‘in Western culture in the twenty-first century, such a prototype might be a written document, created for business purposes with some pretensions to objectivity and maintained in a formal recordkeeping system’. This would allow the acceptance of non-prototypical records: a voice recording created for literary purposes, or personal papers, for example. As well as being ‘atypical’, non-prototypes may, according to Yeo, be ‘boundary objects’, that is, have attributes that straddle different disciplines and communities of practice. Yeo (2008, 131) cites reports, procedure manuals and websites as boundary objects: the last mentioned might be interpreted by different communities ‘as (among other things) a record, a computing resource, a sales platform, a corporate management tool, and a manifestation of contemporary culture’.

Despite acceptance of many common assumptions between scholars, however, consensus with regard to definitions remains elusive, and this scholarly trend continues.

Finally, the output of collaboration between academics and practitioners, for example on national and international standards bodies and the ICA provides the best opportunity, perhaps, for providing a ‘prototype’ definition acceptable to all core recordkeeping disciplines: the widespread practical application of these is evidence that this is the case (Finnell, 2011). While internationally records managers use definitions provided by ISO 15489 (ISO, 2001), so do archivists derive their practices from the standards produced by the ICA, noted above.

5 Definitions of records and archives: two approaches
From the beginning of the twentieth century, therefore, definitions have been developed from a range of contexts, including national archives, professional associations, university departments and international standards organizations. The definitions that have been produced tend to fall broadly into two categories: exclusive and inclusive. The ‘exclusive’ category is quite prescriptive and permits only those records that individually display very specific attributes to be defined as such, and excludes all others. The ‘inclusive’ category takes a more flexible approach which permits, under certain conditions, a range of aggregated information resources to be brought into scope.
5.1 ‘Exclusive’ definitions

The first category is broadly the product of national archives, academics and standards organizations. It offers a strict and exclusive interpretation and is based on the need for records to provide authentic, reliable and auditable evidence of activities and events for the individuals and organizations creating them. As such, the emphasis is on current rather than archival records. Records have been described historically as ‘written documents, drawings and printed matter’ (Muller, Feith and Fruin, 1898), ‘accumulation of documents’ (Casanova, 1928), ‘whole of the papers and documents’ (Brenneke, 1953), ‘documents’ (Jenkinson, 1965) and ‘books, papers, maps, photographs, or other documentary materials’ (Schellenberg, 1956). (More recent descriptions bring digital formats into scope.) In terms of the context of their creation and use, records were required to have been created or accumulated in the conduct of (official) business and used for administrative, legal or other business purposes (Casanova includes ‘cultural’ purposes and Brenneke evidence of the past) by the creating body or official (Schellenberg, 1956 12–16). Jenkinson’s definition (1965, 11) continues to be cited, supported and challenged:

A document which may be said to belong to the class of Archives is one which was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which itself formed a part; and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.

The sharp-eyed will spot that Jenkinson (as do the others noted above) is referring here to archives and not to records, although the attributes he describes more readily align with what today in the Anglophone area would be called records. Jenkinson saw no distinction between archives and records, and it was Schellenberg’s definitions, published in 1956, which provided different definitions for each category, that started a new debate. Schellenberg (1956, 16) declared that while ‘records’ referred to the material that an organization generated as evidence of its activities or for informational purposes, archives were

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.
This counters both Jenkinson’s requirement for an unbroken line of custody (which, he argued, was necessary in order to provide authenticity, and which assumes that records remain in-house and are not collected by external archival organizations) and his opposition to the selection or appraisal of records for historical research purposes. Schellenberg’s is the first in a line of definitions that are more inclusive in nature, discussed further below.

Pursuing the Jenkinsonian legacy, some academics writing in the 1990s and 2000s adhered strongly to his principles, importing them into the new discussions that focused on the management of electronic, born-digital records. Academics at the universities of Pittsburgh and British Columbia (Duranti), while undertaking projects to establish functional requirements for the management of born-digital records, disagreed between themselves about how this might be done in practice, but did agree about the restricted nature of a record.5 As paraphrased by Greene et al. (2004, 4,) they argued that to qualify as such, records are created by business activities and are ‘by nature only evidence of activities and actions (transactions); must be demonstrably authentic (inviolate), reliable … and complete’; while archives ‘are records and only records, not simply created but maintained for the purposes of the creator/parent unit’.

Such a definition excludes such things as diaries, maps, data in databases, information and most non-textual material, as these were not produced as a result of transactions or activities and do not therefore possess the attributes necessary for ‘recordness’. It also disregards any archival records not maintained by their creating body.

Since 1997, when the ICA Committee on Electronic Records (1997, 22) produced a series of studies, it has generally been accepted that

A record is recorded information produced or received in the initiation, conduct or completion of an institutional or individual activity and that comprises content, context and structure sufficient to provide evidence of the activity.

This was a new way of expressing what was already recognized: Schellenberg (1965, 120–1), for example, included in his descriptive diagram of record attributes ‘subject matter’, ‘structure’ and ‘provenance’ – further described as the ‘provenance of a unit, the time and place of its production, its functional origins, the subjects to which it relates, its types and its composition’.
Such attributes have been validated in the international standard ISO 15489-1:2001 Information and Documentation: Records management mentioned above (ISO, 2001). This defines records as:

Information created, received, and maintained as evidence and information by an organization or person, in pursuance of legal obligations or in the transaction of business.

By confining records to evidence of ‘business’ transactions the standard appears very restrictive: and although the term ‘business’ might be interpreted more broadly to encompass more general activities this does not appear to be the intention. The standard further requires that, as well as containing content, a record should include such structure and business context that would enable it to persistently document a transaction; and that it should display the further characteristics of authenticity, reliability, integrity and usability.

Possession of these attributes undoubtedly results in records of high quality. Compliance with the standard reduces the risks of generating incomplete and unreliable evidence and of failures of audit and accountability. A key argument is that only by demonstrating compliance might legal admissibility (the acceptance of records as evidence in a court of law (BSI, 2008), perhaps the ultimate benchmark and key test of recordness) be assured in practice. The ISO 15489 standard (ISO, 2001) acts as a core document for records managers; it does not, however, provide a definition of archives per se.

5.2 ‘Inclusive’ definitions

The second category of definitions, supported predominantly by professional associations, is a more inclusive one, providing a broader categorization of records and archives. It recognizes that in practice organizations generate and depend on large amounts of information and data for the efficient and accountable management of their affairs. These are not all strictly records as defined either by the University of Pittsburgh and the University of British Columbia or the ISO 15489 standard (ISO, 2001), but may be indispensable for ongoing business management. While e-mail and documents saved in records management systems might comply, sets of data in human resources, financial
and other business systems, relational databases, content management systems, publications, the content of websites and intranets, and Web 2.0 content in wikis, blogs and so on would be open to challenge. This has significant implications for records managers, for whom familiarity with the processes of information management, data management and knowledge management is also required alongside an understanding of such boundary objects as information, data and knowledge.

Definitions of records provided by professional recordkeeping associations contribute to this broader category. In the UK the IRMS maintains that records are information assets:

Information and records management is, in a nutshell, all about an organisation’s control and utilisation of its information assets. These in turn are defined as all the various records and information resources held by an organisation. Information assets comprise all written records as well as data, images, sound recordings and information held in other formats. They include information held in paper, electronic and other media as well as staff knowledge relating to their employment within the organisation.

(IRMS, 2011)

As far as legal admissibility is concerned it might be argued that the courts will in practice consider non-‘record’ material. In the USA, for example, law commissioners challenge the admissibility of a record less on the basis of its inherent recordness than on the fact that ‘the sources of information or the method or circumstances of preparation indicate a lack of trustworthiness’ (Greene et al., 2004, 11). Greene et al. also note that the organization’s retention decisions are based on degrees not of recordness but of utility of the material to that organization.

In terms of archives, the broader approach acknowledges that those undertaking archival research may be less concerned with recordness, or the structure, context and provenance, of the material at hand than with its content. Schellenberg’s definitions recognize this, as do those provided by professional associations. Canadian Terry Cook’s (2000) response to the ‘exclusive’ definition explains why:

There seems little space in this new discourse that is dominated by talk of business transactions, evidence, accountability, metadata, electronic records and
distributed custody of archives, for the traditional discourse of archivists centered around history, heritage, culture, research, social memory and the curatorial custody of archives.

According to the Society of American Archivists (2012) Glossary:

‘Record’ connotes documents, rather than artifacts or published materials, although collections of records may contain artifacts and books. To the extent that records are defined in terms of their function rather than their characteristics, the definition is stretched to include many materials not normally understood to be a record; an artifact may function as a record, even though it falls outside the vernacular understanding of the definition.

And archives are defined as:

Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control; permanent records.

5.3 Some further refinements

A selection of scholarly definitions can be added to those provided by professional organizations, associations and national archives. Reference has already been made to David Bearman’s approach: for him, the role of records is to provide evidence of transactions; records themselves are identified as ‘metadata encapsulated objects’:

Metadata encapsulated objects may contain other metadata encapsulated objects, because records frequently consist of other records brought together under a new ‘cover’, as when correspondence, reports and results of database projections are forwarded to a management committee for decision.

(Bearman and Sochats, c.1995)

Brien Brothman (2001, 51–2) challenges this narrow outlook, perceiving records as ‘cognitive memory artifacts’:
The conviction that evidence is central to archival practice may have merit, but it is one that needs to be tested on several counts … This essay proposes that the construal of records as cognitive memory artifacts, rather than merely as legal, evidence-bearing artifacts, opens up a potentially endless field of possibilities for institutional and professional growth that only a failure of imagination can limit.

Tom Nesmith (2006, 262), in denying that records and archives were simply the static objects of traditional definition, re-emphasizes their role in a series of processes and with a number of contexts:

A record is an evolving mediation of understanding about some phenomenon – a mediation created by social and technical processes of inscription, transmission, and contextualization …

He perceived archiving

as the multifaceted process of making memories by performing remembered or otherwise recorded acts, transmitting such accounts over time and space, organizing, interpreting, forgetting, and even destroying them, [which] produces constructions of some prior activity or condition.

Geoffrey Yeo (2007, 337; 2008, 136) defines records as representations of activities, taking care not to be too prescriptive about the nature of that representation:

Records can be characterized as persistent representations of activities created by participants or observers of those activities or by their authorized proxies.

While definitions will continue to evolve and the debate will clearly endure, there is general agreement that a real shift in thinking has occurred as a result of many technological, philosophical, social and other factors. This has been described as a paradigm shift, something that occurs when existing principles no longer fit newly developed practical situations and new ideas, concepts and perspectives are developed. In recordkeeping this is well described by Terry Cook (2001b, 4):
At the heart of the new paradigm is a shift away from viewing records as static physical objects, and towards understanding them as dynamic virtual concepts; a shift away from looking at records as the passive products of human or administrative activity and towards considering records as active agents themselves in the formation of human and organizational memory; a shift equally away from seeing the context of records creation resting within stable hierarchical organizations to situating records within fluid horizontal networks of work-flow functionality. For archivists, the paradigm shift requires moving away from identifying themselves as passive guardians of an inherited legacy to celebrating their role in actively shaping collective (or social) memory. Stated another way, archival theoretical discourse is shifting from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from the record to the recording context, from the ‘natural’ residue or passive by-product of administrative activity to the consciously constructed and actively mediated ‘archivalisation’ of social memory.

This is by no means an exhaustive account of the definitions of records and archives that have been published over the past hundred or so years. However, I have tried to identify such key issues as the roles of evidence, activities, provenance, context, history and memory in relation to records and archives, and which contribute to the overall, complex picture.

The lesson to be taken from this discussion is that while there is a general understanding of the role, purpose and definitions of records, archives and the recordkeeping profession, the emergence of different contextual and perspectival approaches will ensure an ongoing debate.

6 The application of concepts in practice

What is the point of all these discussions about the conceptual aspects of the nature, characteristics and roles of records and archives? Is there not a risk that in devoting too much time and attention to theories, principles and concepts we might lose sight of their relevance to and impact on practice?

It undoubtedly helps if theory and concepts can be seen to be relevant in practice, although at the extremes their relevance may not always be immediately obvious. At the same time it is unproductive to attempt to separate theory from practice: we know that the relationship between the two is interactive and iterative. According to Foucault (Williams, 2006b, 81–2),
'practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another', and recordkeepers have accepted this contention.

It can, for example, be difficult to see the immediate relevance of the overarching concept of postmodernism to recordkeeping. A theory that so explicitly rejects fixed definitions seems very difficult to pin down in practical terms. Hardiman (2009, 28, 31), however, explains that while 'postmodernism' ‘resists definition because it is not a coherent philosophy but a “pervasive mindset”’, a basic understanding of such core philosophies can provide a useful context for practical work. The postmodern mindset places in context the writings of some of the most influential recordkeepers – Cook, Harris, Nesmith, Schwartz and Ketelaar, for example – who certainly describe how postmodernism informs practice. If an understanding of postmodern approaches does no more than explain why our formerly traditional stances of neutrality, objectivity and passivity – the products of the positivist philosophy espoused by Jenkinson – are no longer tenable, it will have done its job.

All recordkeeping functions are based on concepts and principles. Conceptual discussions about the nature of records and archives must take place before any serious action can take place in managing them. The identification of content, context and structure and the assurance of authenticity, reliability and integrity in both paper and digital records provide the basic building blocks in the development of any recordkeeping system. We know that national and international standards intermediate between concepts and their application: so that anyone who is setting up or maintaining systems using these will already be applying such concepts in practice. In addition, the management of archival records depends on sufficient understanding of their attributes and characteristics to facilitate methods of ensuring that evidence of provenance and contextual relationships remains intact.

An understanding of the nature of records and archives will accompany a realization of how they ‘behave’ in different environments, since this too will affect their management. Customary approaches have identified the lifecycle (Williams, 2006a, 10–12; Parker, 1999, 12–13) as a model for behaviour, and indeed in a pre-digital environment this made sense. The notion that any record has a life – that, having been generated, it has an active life in maturity, a less active life in old age and at death is either
destroyed or transferred to the archives – is useful in supporting a sequential series of processes such as creation, description, storage, retrieval, appraisal and destruction. It is less useful in that it pays scant attention to archival processes (i.e. after the end-of-life stage) and fails to recognize that many records do not follow this path, some being born ‘archival’, others born ephemeral, and others going into reverse by becoming current again.

The continuum model, in contrast, discards the notion of a series of linear stages and processes because it recognizes that actions on records do not occur sequentially, particularly in a digital environment, where records are essentially intangible and many are dynamic (Atherton, 1985–86). The processes of record creation, classification, appraisal, control, maintenance and retrieval are seen as multidimensional, and so interrelated, overlapping and integrated that one has to view records/archives holistically (Cook, 2000). The continuum model’s Australian creators (Piggott and McKemmish, 1994; Standards Australia, 1996, Clause 4.22; Upward, 2005, 202) see ‘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 the preservation and use of records as archives’. Although this model does not map neatly to a series of processes in the way that the lifecycle model does, in offering recordkeepers a more realistic understanding of how records actually behave it enables systems to be developed that recognize this complexity (Flynn, 2001).

Conclusion

This chapter has considered the role of records and archives for individuals, organizations and society, the development of definitions of records and archives and the importance of the interplay between concept and practice. What has become clear is that thinking about records and archives is forever evolving. As technologies and business, organizational and social environments develop and change, so the potential – and need – for new theoretical and practical approaches becomes evident. Current challenges that the profession is proactively engaging with, for example, include the interrelated impacts of Web 2.0 and the volunteering movement. Developments in social media have reduced the barriers between professionals and non-professionals, experts and the crowd. This has enabled the skills and knowledge of a wider public to be actively brought
into archival and other heritage resources via interactive wikis, blogs and so on. Volunteering is having a similar effect: there is a huge human resource now being tapped whose contribution to recordkeeping has yet to be measured. At the same time its impact on the role of the profession and professional bodies needs to be considered. For the future, contributions to the literature about such issues as the development and implications for recordkeeping of cloud technologies, crowd sourcing and the Semantic Web should be anticipated. All such developments will necessarily refer back to the fundamental concepts, natures and attributes of records and archives, and the processes associated with recordkeeping in diverse environments.

Notes


2 The ‘archival turn’ is described by Buchanan (2011, 40) as ‘an inter- or cross-disciplinary trend as scholars look outside the discipline with which they normally identify, to adopt techniques or approaches from another’.

3 T. R. Schellenberg (1956, 15), as a pragmatist rather than a postmodernist, noted that ‘it is obvious, therefore that there is no final or ultimate definition of the term “archives” that must be accepted without change and in preference to all others’.

4 S. Muller, J. A. Feith and R. Fruin produced their manual Handleiding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven in 1898 in co-operation with the State Archives of the Netherlands and the Ministry of the Interior for the Dutch Association of Archivists; it was translated into English in 1940 as Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives. Eugenio Casanova, Superintendent of the Archivio di Stato in Rome and Director of the Archivio del Regno, published Archivistica in Siena in 1928. Adolf Brenneke, director of the Prussian State

5Bearman and Sochats (c.1995); Luciana Duranti at the University of British Columbia heads the InterPARES Project. The InterPARES 1 Project ran from 1994 to 1997, www.interpares.org/ip1/ip1_index.cfm.

6A typical definition of information and data, used by Bantin, is ‘information is not just data collected; rather it is data collected, organized, ordered, and imbued with meaning and context. Information must inform while data has no such mandate. Information must be bounded, while data can be limitless’ (Bantin, 2008, 67).

References and further reading


Cunningham, A. (1996) Beyond the Pale? The ‘flinty’ relationship between archivists who collect the private records of individuals and the rest of the archival profession, Archives and Manuscripts, 24 (1), 20–6.


