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Digital records present archives and archivists with a different set of problems than traditional paper records, in addition to the sorts of problems archives have always faced. There are two main schools of thought about how to deal with electronic records. One advocates staying with traditional methods for appraisal and custody. An alternate school of thought proposes a reassessment of both appraisal and storage. Linda Henry discusses the relevance of traditional methods, while Philip Bantin discusses modifying archival methods to deal with the new media.

Henry (1998) supports using traditional approaches when working with electronic documents, although with “new procedures” (pg 311) when necessary. Traditional models have already been proven to work with large volumes of records, and should also work with the volume of electronic records. The first archivists to work with electronic records determined that “Schellenberg’s informational and evidential values remained relevant for appraisal, and that traditional archival principals also should guide archivists’ thinking about arrangement, description, storage, and access” (pg 311). Using the same framework provides structure and consistency similar to paper records.

However, Bantin argues that without active and early intervention from archivists, electronic records may never survive, or even be created (pg 5). Bantin discusses an alternative called the “Records Continuum Model.” The difference between the continuum model and the traditional, life-cycle approach is that “the continuum model is based upon an integration of the responsibilities and accountabilities associated with the management of records” (pg 5). It is described as a regime for recordkeeping, rather than a method of appraisal. Models and strategies are implemented early in the records

management process, preferably at the design state, instead of at the end of the life cycle, as with traditional models.

One point the life-cycle model has over the continuum model is the weight of years. The life-cycle model has been the standard for non-digital records in North America for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Henry (1998) argues that the lessons archivists have learned with paper records can be applied to electronic records as well. Problems such as multiple drafts and loss of records are not unique to electronic media. The continuum model, by contrast, has very little history to support it. Bantin acknowledges that the new strategies “have not been properly tested in the field” (pg 17), and suggests that archives should explore the various options and to remain flexible and open to new ways of doing things. While Henry suggests that archivists should stay with the tried and true methods, Bantin argues that holding to notions of the past could be counterproductive in the present environment.

Henry (1998) argues that supporters of the new practices fail to offer evidence of why the old practices won't work, or why the new practices would only apply to electronic records. They offer alarmist imagery and write with unnecessary jargon and technobabble. The writing “seems to discourage new learning and to offer little useful advice” (pg 326). In addition, the advocates of the new paradigm who have archival experience do not use that experience to support their claim, nor do they use the experience of archives which already hold electronic records. Instead, they formulate theories “lacking a basis in practice” (pg 324). This has had the effect of deterring archivists both from learning about electronic records, and from developing electronic

records programs, since most of the writing “seems to discourage new learning and to offer little useful advice” (pg 326).

Bantin asserts that while the emergence of electronic records may have prompted a reassessment of archival and records issues, all of the issues and strategies in the new paradigm can be applied to paper records as well. The only major distinction between electronic records and paper records is that the electronic environment allows for easier distributed custody. Many of the appraisal theories from the last ten to fifteen years, not just the ones applied to electronic records, have differed from the traditional approach.

One component of the continuum model is the distributed custody approach. The premise behind this being that the electronic environment allows archival institutions to fulfill their responsibilities without having to assume physical custody of the records. One argument for this approach is that the technology for storing and accessing the records already exists at the creating offices, and duplicating the technology within the archival setting would be a waste of resources, as would training the archivists in the skills necessary to use the technology. Another argument is that insisting on custody may result in important records never making it to the archives. The records may get lost in the transition or simply never be transferred. The primary issue for records is not custody, but ensuring that records are housed and managed “according to well-established standards” (pg 8). The electronic environment allows this to be done while keeping the records at the creating offices.

However, Henry (1998) argues that leaving the preservation of records up to the record creators could lead to record destruction. Record creators “have little incentive to retain records—in any form—beyond their primary usefulness” (pg 320). Old records

may be deleted to gain disk space, or may end up being altered. In addition, it often is not the newest technology that is the problem, but information that is kept in old, now-obsolete formats. Record creators have little incentive to keep old technology or to convert old records into new formats. Conversion also brings up the possibility of records being corrupted or otherwise altered in the process. Henry points out that while the Australian records management standard has adopted the continuum model, but so far no national archives in Europe has opted to take a non-custodial approach, implying that none of them have determined this to be a viable alternative to traditional archival practices.

Schellenberg's methodology for appraising records placed an emphasis on identifying future research values in the records. Critics argue that this does not provide a proper answer for why records are appraised. Trying to predict research needs is not a realistic goal, in part because research needs change as society changes. In addition, this conflicts with basic archival theory, which, according to Jenkinson, is "to retain the impartial and authentic qualities of the records" (pg 4). Making value judgments based on future research needs could affect the impartiality of the records. Instead, Bantin states, archives should preserve "evidence documenting the functions, processes, activities, and transactions undertaken and completed by the institution or individual," where evidence refers to "those impartial, authentic, and interrelated records which are created 'naturally' in the process of conducting business or undertaking activities" (pg 9-10). In this model, records would be appraised early, preferably at the design stage. The record creating offices would be analyzed from the top down, starting with the business functions and structure, and then moving down to the records, instead of the traditional method of

looking at the records and moving up. In this model, what is important is the record itself, instead of the information contained in the record.

Henry (1998) argues that with this method, archives could end up with only “records that document the ‘footprints of bureaucrats,’” that may exclude “documentary materials that may have permanent value, such as databases and personal papers” (pg 315).

Simultaneously, it could also lead to keeping more records than the traditional method, simply because the documents were created by an office or function that was deemed important. She also points out that current practices already have archivists appraising active records. She also asserts that archivists should not intervene in record creation to the point where they become creators of records.

Traditional archiving methods and principals can still be applied to electronic records. For issues such as appraisal and custodianship, electronic records can be treated similarly to paper records. Archives do not need to be recreated because of the new media.

However, issues such as access and storage require new solutions. While some archives have been dealing with electronic records for years, most of the new methods are still untested, and new technology and new methods are still being developed. Archives may have to stay open to trying both old and new methods with digital records to see what works best.

References:

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