

Letters to the Editor

The Power of Provenance: A Critique of David Bearman and Richard Lytle

The article by David Bearman and Richard Lytle in *Archivaria* 21 on the power of provenance for retrieval of archival information bears the imprint of Bearman's heavy hand, not Lytle's. Filled with bald assertions and generalizations that are not substantiated, either by elaborations to clarify meanings, or by adequate examples, I find it a disturbing tirade. There is also a lack of awareness of what has been written on the subject, and archival practices are misrepresented — as I trust most readers will observe for themselves. Let's begin.

The "power of provenance" as an inferential system was first indicated by me in my *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States* (pp. 115-16). It was subsequently elaborated upon in the second edition of the University of Washington Library's *Manual on Accessioning, Arrangement and Description* (1982), which includes a large example entitled "The Inferential Power of Provenance." It is wholly different from that of these two authors, I might add. (See also my letter on page 8 in *Archivaria* 18.) A fuller elaboration will soon appear in the next volume of *Advances in Librarianship* under the title "Archival Management and Librarianship: An Exploration of Prospects for Their Integration." The authors, however, do not explain what is "inferential" about provenance. In my view, records are given their original meaning by the context in which they are generated, and that meaning can be expanded upon in accordance with the way they are acted upon subsequently by people and agencies. It can also subsequently be studied without any special attention being given to hierarchy, unless that is itself a special factor in the search.

Of key relevance to Bearman and Lytle's theme should be the series of articles by Australian archivists Peter Scott, C.D. Smith, and G. Finlay ("Archives and Administrative Change: Some Methods and Approaches.") This should be required reading for those who appear to speak with the kind of authority that Bearman and Lytle parade before us. The Australians explain how control at the series level can be accomplished despite the transfer of series with the functions that led to their creation (independently of the record group or groups with which they are affiliated in the course of their file history). What they presuppose but, unfortunately, do not see fit to articulate,

is a controlled records environment. Such an environment is essential if the provenance of the series is to be faithfully recorded. But unless the records environment is under intellectual control (at least) the deficiencies must be compensated for — ultimately by the archivist in appraisal, rearranging the records as needed, inventorying, and indexing/cataloguing.

Bearman and Lytle also misleadingly portray information retrieval in a “classical” archival setting by limiting the search process to a “mono-hierarchical” approach: “[In a] provenance-based retrieval [system] the archivist ... retrieves by relating the subject query to the activities of the organization ... using the file classification structures created by the originating office and recorded by the archivist in container lists and the like.” This is but one method of retrieval, and by no means the typical one. Usually entries in a card catalogue or index are the initial point of contact. These entries ignore hierarchy; they transcend the limitations of a hierarchical method by referring the searcher to all records of which there is knowledge that might contain relevant information. The container list is then consulted, and the user moves on from there. This is an imperfect process as we all know; but it is the basis on which retrieval is built, even that of the authors. In this light, their distinction between mono- and poly-hierarchical lacks meaning or relevance.

“Superior/subordinate relationships” are no more a factor in one or the other administrative set-up. The task is really one of intellectual control, and that begins when the records are created. Clear, unambiguous file unit descriptors are needed in the beginning so that appraisal can be built into the system at the appropriate time — at the start. By implementing such a system, index terms become part of the system, and they provide most of the access points automatically. Bearman and Lytle ignore the fact that this is being done already; what is lacking is a system that brings together information/records management and archival management. Presumably the Australians are doing this by their series level controls. In light of the above commentary and Bearman and Lytle’s contentions, I find contradictory their observation that “A thorough empirical study of the descriptive practices of archival repositories demonstrated no connection between ‘hierarchical level’ and descriptive elements...” This is the point I make.

Who, among archivists, is going to dispute the truism that authority records are essential for establishing a common language? And who will argue with them about the need to include “form and function” as access points. Too much reliance is placed by them on administrative histories as a source of access points, and too little attention — none in fact — is placed on information that is already in the records themselves, as identifiers: proper names, natural language topical terms which need little modification to be useful, functional terms, and other identifiers that are easy to come by and which automation gives archivists the opportunity to use on an unprecedented scale. What is lacking is a system that brings together the access points that are already there, before digging for more from administrative histories (beyond what is needed for provenance information).

Bearman and Lytle, in outlining the “entire system,” would have archivists (p. 24) start by creating access points that often do not yet exist, before using those which are already there. In promoting their “information engine” the authors suggest that the software system will make inferences to provenance information. Why not make them directly to the records themselves, instead of going through the very hierarchical search that the authors so painfully decry? Contrary to their contention that the “system is not in our

immediate future,” I think it is. What is lacking is the bringing together of the administrative entities involved in information creation and management. Unless this is done, archivists must continue to compensate for the deficiencies in the information system.

As to administrative histories, there is a danger in getting staff bogged down in compiling them. Restraint should be exercised, and their compilation should be restricted initially to establishing provenance. If there is time and need, later, to elaborate, fine and dandy. It's a luxury few institutions can afford.

As to the record group concept, whatever its deficiencies, it is not a “physical shelf-order classification” system, and few archives that I know try to concentrate records of one record group together except when there is an opportunity to do so. Archivists long ago recognized that “honeycombing” of the stacks would be the result, and that this would be at an unproductive cost. Location records are sufficient for such administrative purposes. As a concept, the record group provides the initial control of a record series, and it will always be useful for this reason. Information in any series is always implied by the nature of the record group with which the series is administratively linked. If the reader thinks of the record group as “record creating agency” this feature will be obvious. Whether it relates to hierarchy is really of little significance.

I must confess to even more puzzlement by Bearman and Lytle's statement at the bottom of page 24: “If the archivist's use of provenance in arrangement and description — which establishes links backwards from records to creating activities — is reversed, a potential exists for a practical and powerful means of gaining access to and managing information.” Do Bearman and Lytle really mean that description should precede arrangement? If so, we are entitled to know what inferential powers of provenance — in their usage — can be unlocked in the process. As such the statement is merely a bald assertion. They need to explore the relationships between arrangement and description before making what appears to me as an absurd statement.

One last comment. Bearman, particularly, continues to have a fixation on inter-institutional exchange of administrative information. This problem is miniscule compared to that of providing intellectual control. Let's get our priorities straight.

(I am now retired, and I really mean it. This is the last piece I shall ever write on archives. No, I will not respond to Bearman, nor to Lytle, should he join in.)

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Visual Aid in the Computer Age

Jim Burant is to be applauded for his letter in *Archivaria* 19 (“Archivists Need Visual Aid”) which noted the failure of most members of the archival profession to employ audio-visual tools or other non-textual aids when delivering papers at conferences. Indeed, considered overall, the profession has proven reluctant to embrace these tools and remained less than imaginative concerning the inherent capabilities engendered by these