Meeting the Future by Returning to the Past: A Commentary on Hugh Taylor's Transformations

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A longer version of the following remarks was presented at the opening session of the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists in June 1987 with three purposes: to open the conference officially and welcome delegates to McMaster University, to introduce Hugh A. Taylor as the keynote speaker, and to comment on his address once it was delivered. At the request of the editors of Archivaria, *an edited version of the original presentation, focusing on the third purpose only, has been produced to complement the published version of Hugh Taylor's article.*

It is a compliment to Hugh Taylor to say that I was overwhelmed when I first read his paper. Indeed, it is so abundantly strewn with metaphor and symbolism that I succumbed to the temptation to luxuriate and enjoy the rich imagery — of "transmedia shifts," "seas of mega choice," "monks at the gate," "memorial patterning," "electronic antiquarianism," and "from dust to ashes — burnout in the archives." I hoped, of course, that this intuitive approach would in the end prove to be a method to help me come to terms with the implications of Hugh's four transformations for the more prosaic work that fills the archivist's days. In our working life, we are not accustomed to a daily exercise of philosophical speculation such as that with which Hugh engages us nor, I venture, do we often think about the broad lines of cultural transformation when faced with a tricky acquisition negotiation or the very practical problem of fitting a new accession into already cramped space. We all, I think, have secretly speculated that the mess before us on the sorting floor was a sign that the order and neatness of bureaucracy and its ways are, at best, an heroic archival myth nurtured, perhaps, on the real experience of the past but long honoured only in the filing manual and not in the file room, or at worst, that the natural order of recorded ways is a cruel archival hoax. The strength of Hugh's piece is that he articulates with imagination and insight some of the broad societal patterns which in his view lie behind many of these inchoate misgivings most archivists feel in the new age of information overload.

In discussing the four transformations which Hugh feels will not only indelibly alter our customary ways of acquiring and searching, but will also affect the long cherished archival principles of order and provenance, I would like to make three points about the implications of the transmedia shift which is taking place in society and in the archives.

I suggest that the archives is not changing: if I may be permitted my own paradox, this is because archives, like any memory, are always in a state of becoming. The institutional analogy with memory is, in the light of Hugh's remarks about memorial ways, just as valid today when the impact of sophisticated computer and communications technology is creating only the latest of many transmedia shifts archives have experienced. This shifting means, I think, that the patterns of organizing our records which we have developed, because they seemed so useful in one environment, inevitably and necessarily have to undergo changes as well. The point here is that such change is a natural part of the archival ethos. The value and utility of the old must be constantly matched to new conditions so that we too establish new principles to maintain the balance of archival "natural law." What is this natural law of archives? Although Hugh sees a breakdown in a world organized by the rigid concepts inspired by Newtonian physics, I do not think we would be in serious disagreement over the law I am about to propose, which is that data *plus* context *equals* meaning. But if the centre is to hold in Hugh's intellectual implosion with its concomitant structural rending and data fallout, or, in more Newtonian terms, if the equation of data + context = meaning is to remain balanced, we will need to alter some elements in it.

My first practical observation following Hugh's line of thought is on the role of records management and the relationship of archival operations, particularly acquisition, to it. Our world view of a great paper production line with the records managers supervising work on the shop floor and the archivist at the end as quality control supervisor, selecting the best and most useful products for the archives show room, will need to change. To maintain the concept of a records production line will leave us isolated in a new electronic environment where there is no tangible and predictable product. We should remember, in this regard, that the computer is not the only modern machine which has had an impact on the produciton of records. Hugh has directed our attention to the changes wrought by printing and most archivists are painfully aware of the "pre-computer" revolution in records brought on by the mass introduction of the electrostatic copier. Each successive change in the concept of records and in their production has brought about necessary changes in the way we as archivists have looked at records and the ways we have appraised, acquired, and arranged them. Photocopying has long since eroded not only our definitions of original and copy, but also fundamentally changed the way we appraise the records of bureaucracies where the copier has had its most significant impact on the conduct of business, on decision-making, and on the techniques of information exchange. The important point here is that the multiplication of copies without recourse to the printing press and the trappings of traditional publication — the xerographic revolution if you will — while it blurred the traditional definitions of original and copy was worked out in a hard-copy environment. This now is changing despite the immense amount of paper "flak" still being produced by computerized record systems. This "flak" should not confuse us. The paper record will become vestigial to our ways of thought and business, soon, perhaps not in our lifetime, but soon. Unlike Hugh, who seems to suggest that we might have to accept a severing of the nexus between the creating and archiving of records which we have so assiduously cultivated through our connections with records management, and be satisfied with getting more out of less — perhaps Hugh is being the devil's advocate here — I think we should be more concerned about the breakdown in the effectiveness of records management in a machine environment. The general loss of machine-readable records and the very small and unsteady stream of such records into archives indicates that records management has not yet come to terms with the new

managerial requirements of machine as opposed to paper records. But the loss of records implied by the thin trickle of regularly transferred machine-readable data to our archives is only one obvious symptom of a more serious malaise. Archiving is going on — indeed, the transformation of the word from noun to verb is the product of the systems environment which coined the term "archiving" to reflect much longer data retention periods than those implied by the customary generation labels. Perhaps we should not be too concerned about archiving which goes on beyond our doors: we need all the help we can get, so perhaps we should welcome this spontaneous departure. But I, for one, have serious reservations about the unilateral archival independence implied by the development of numerous in-house data archives. This development is taking place without an overall archival perspective dedicated to the integrity and authenticity of the record; it is taking place by reason of expediency rather than reflection and in isolation one from another. Numerous, small data archives in an organization are like isolated gene pools, inbred, narrow, and lacking the strength which comes from cross-fertilization. We must, very soon, establish links with the real managers of machine records whatever they be called. Otherwise, we run the risk of becoming a museum of communications, and not a living cultural entity.

My second practical observation concerns archival principles and their applicability to a machine environment. If the archival function has been hijacked along with the name, perhaps it is time to re-examine our basic definitions and defences. Personally, I have always had a fondness for the word "keeper," partly because of its rich historic associations and the lively imagery it inspires, and partly, I think perversely, because it is a name no one else has expressed much interest in. But historical nomenclature, however interesting, is unimportant. I want to reinforce something Hugh has said in passing which I think is very important and bears closer examination. It is the ancient discipline of diplomatic, the study of the form and context of documents which should once again come to the fore as a major, if not the major, disciplinary activity of archivists. More than ever, in this age of systems design, database configurations, speed and real-time edits, it is the study of context which will give that extra dimension of meaning to data archives. Hugh suggests that the concepts of provenance, and particularly of original order, are principles best suited to the records of another age. We are heading for a palimpsestuous society where real-time queries and the interactive use of machines will create an environment akin to that of an oral society. Of course, this analogy cannot be taken too far because the cultural structures and demands of an oral-based tradition are far less complex than the ones which exist today. But the real-time analogy between machine and memorial ways implies instantaneous decisions, interactive processes, and a constant winnowing-out of information based on perceived need. Original order — indeed, the concept of original itself — is meaningless in this environment. But, at the same time that the old way of archival order breaks down when applied to machine records, it is diplomatic which should shine as the study of context and the determination of authenticity. Diplomatic is as relevant now in a machine-controlled environment, where the traditional definitions of records are lost in a silicon no-man's land, as it was for the pre-Gutenberg days of courts and their chanceries, where all documents were original and the study of form gave meaning to documents by placing them in a context where their interrelationships could be understood and thus have meaning to those who studied and used them. But diplomatic should not just be returned to centre stage dressed now in modern garb and perhaps modern jargon as "chiplomatic." The study of context and, indeed, the contextual approach to social analysis should also lead us to revitalize our acquisition

strategies in Hugh's emergent culture. Context analysis is not just a technique for the analysis and description of records in our custody; it is an archival *chef d'oeuvre* which must also be used in appraisal and acquisitions.

My third point concerns future archives and their users. Having reestablished the balance on the left side of the equation, that is data+context, we will be in the best position to help users find meaning in archives on the right side of the equation. We will, very soon, be faced with a generation of users who have been brought up with the computer and who will use it intuitively rather than in the structural way of the adult learning a new skill. New finding aids will be constructed by linking functional modules which are keyed to a thesaurus-controlled index. Machine-based finding aids will permit random searches and encourage the processes of thinking by immediate interaction. Hugh points out that we should strive to be the clarifiers of questions rather than the providers of answers, not "monks at the gate" but referees in a free-for-all game of question and answer. There is also a very practical implication of the computer: archives will increasingly need to cope with the user who wants to approach the records of the past using a machine. Very few archival institutions are equipped with the space to permit man and machine to meet the records of the past. Perhaps Hugh is right in suggesting that we have already moved very smartly into a search-driven society: we certainly have only just begun to feel the impact of a searching public fascinated by the computer. We are seeing now, today, the archives being transformed from a place of contemplation and scholarship to a place of intense diverse activities and excitement where the traditional scholar is but one user. I would contend that the phenomenon of the genealogist has been misunderstood: they are not pursuing narrow antiquarian interests of marginal social importance or use; rather their hot pursuit of the past is driven by a deep desire to establish their own personal bonds with society. Their use of records — indeed, the very act of the creation of records — satisfies a deep social need. I would hazard that the genealogist is but the vanguard of new masses of users who will swamp our traditional clientele and involve us in new programmes. More and more the cultural role of archives will become important as the anomie of modern society stimulates people to refresh their social bonds.

In the transmedia shift we are experiencing, the archive is still a paradigm for memory. Whether the change wrought by the computer will be as fundamental as the one in the twelfth century, when western civilization made the leap from memory to written records in the affairs of state and business, remains to be seen. Perhaps Hugh is right and the trans-formations in society and archives will force new patterns of organizing knowledge to emerge. Yet a floppy disk or magnetic tape will never be offered as the tangible connection between word and deed: the deed is the computer and the act is the multiple combinations possible when people, data, software, and the computer are brought together. For archivists, the job, it seems clear, is to lock this new track to our cultural memory and to ensure that machine information has archival meaning by exploring the connection between data and its context. How this shall be done, as always, presents challenges to the ways we have customarily done business. But if the ways and means change, the essential archival focus on diplomatic, on context, on meaning, must not if we are to be responsible keepers of the electronic record.

When Hugh wrote me to enclose his paper, he said it would be his last — a ninth symphony he called it. While this may be his ninth stimulating and provocative offering, I urge Hugh to take Haydn as his musical model — we shall then have the pleasure of hearing or reading at least 97 more! Perhaps the most appropriate benediction I can offer

is this: may the future say of this generation of Canadian archivists that we followed the example and lead of Hugh Taylor and never suffered any hardening of the archival imagination.