

# *Weaving Provenancial and Documentary Relations*

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In the Netherlands, archivists have begun to translate their knowledge of the bureaucratic environment, and the administrative processes and procedures typical of it, into more integrated and systematic methodologies for appraisal, intellectual control and access. According to Peter Sigmond, who has recently reported on these developments,<sup>1</sup> Dutch archivists are turning their attention to the examination and elucidation of the administrative structures and bureaucratic procedures underlying the creation of various forms of documents, since, as Sigmond puts it, "almost all activities of an administration are to be brought back to procedures, laid down in instructions and regulations and during these procedures certain prescribed forms are always used."<sup>2</sup> What follows are some observations about the Dutch approach and its potential value for archival management, particularly in the areas of appraisal, intellectual control and access.

The focus of analysis in the approach Peter Sigmond outlines are the various documentary forms that result from administrative action. The concept of documentary form is used in the diplomatic sense, and refers to documents containing information described or transmitted by means of rules of representation and governed by rules of procedure.<sup>3</sup> As Sigmond makes clear, however, the physical and intellectual form of a given document is only one strand in an intricate web of "provenancial and documentary" relations.<sup>4</sup> To understand the meaning of a particular documentary form, therefore, and appraise its value, it is essential first to determine the nature of the bureaucratic action (for example, the function, activity or transaction) that generated it, as well as the social, legal and administrative structure that provided the context for that action. It is only when provenancial relationships have been delineated and elucidated that the documentary forms that embody them can be understood and appraised in a coherent and defensible manner. Moreover, because the analysis of administrative action precedes the analysis and appraisal of the forms themselves, it becomes possible not only to determine what can and cannot safely be destroyed, but also to identify gaps in the documentation.

The approach can best be characterized as a principled one, that is, an approach grounded in and reflective of *respect des fonds*, the principle on which the discipline of archives rests. As applied to bureaucratic entities, the principle assumes that records are grouped together as part of the work of the administration that produced or received

them and, as such, represent what Michael Duchein terms an “unbreakable” or “infrangible” whole (a fonds); they should therefore remain together when the business is completed and the records transferred to the archives. Observing the principles of *respect des fonds* requires that the integrity of the fonds be protected. This means, first, that the records of a given administration should not be mixed or combined with the records of another administration—in order to protect the external integrity of the fonds; and, secondly, that the records should be kept together in their original order, if it exists or has been maintained—in order to protect internal integrity of the fonds. The protection of these two aspects of *respect des fonds* ensures that the records being preserved adequately document the organizational and functional structure of an administration.

When we speak of preserving the external integrity of the fonds we are talking about the realm of provenancial relationships: that is, the legal and administrative context in which a fonds as a whole is created; more specifically, the functions, activities and transactions that give shape to it. Preserving the internal integrity of the fonds, on the other hand, takes us into the realm of documentary relationships: the genesis, forms and transmission of the documents within a fonds, the procedural relationships among those documents, and the purposes they serve in a given administrative environment. The evidential value of a body of records, which Terry Eastwood succinctly typifies as “the value of the documents as a record of what occurred and how it occurred in the context in which it occurred,”<sup>5</sup> is embedded in these provenancial and documentary relationships. What commends the approach taken in the Netherlands is that, by plotting the trajectory from administrative structure to bureaucratic procedure to documentation, it illuminates the symbiotic relationship that exists between the contextual realms of provenance and documentation, and demonstrates the constant mediation between process and product inherent in that relationship.

The Dutch approach focuses on the appraisal of “archives,” defined in Dutch law as records that are at least fifty years old. Nevertheless, if we agree that the fonds is an organic composite evolving from day to day in the course of the conduct of organizational activity, it becomes clear that such an approach can (and should) be applied with equal effect to the management of records still in the active and semi-active stages of their existence. It has been argued, by Luciana Duranti for example, that

If knowledge of administrative structures, bureaucratic procedures, documentary processes and forms, allows archivists to analyse records for selection and acquisition, it also enables them to participate with competence in the creation, maintenance, and use of current records by giving advice about the determination of document profiles, the simplification of bureaucratic procedures, and the adoption of classification and retrieval systems.<sup>6</sup>

Conversely, our ability to analyse and appraise records for selection and acquisition on the basis of these self-same administrative structures, bureaucratic procedures and documentary processes and forms, would be greatly improved if we were able to control the records from the time of their initial creation and use. Such control encourages a unified vision of the fonds as an integrated and continuous entity from the time of its creation, and helps to ensure a more accurate reflection of a fonds in file classification schemes and records schedules during its active life, and in finding aids of various kinds after the records have been transferred to the archives.

It seems equally clear that, with its focus on the constant mediation between administrative process and documentary product, the approach has applicability to electronic as well as paper-based record-keeping environments. In fact, the need to appraise electronic records has provided the impetus for archivists to re-focus their attention on the provenancial context in which records are created and used, regardless of their physical format. Dorothy Ahlgren and John McDonald, for example, assert the continuing value of the principle of *respect des fonds* when they suggest that “the complexity of a large computerized information system reinforces the traditional archival need to preserve the integrity and unity of an organic body of information.”<sup>7</sup> The notion that records are essentially transactional and that the processes and procedures governing their creation are central to our understanding of them, is reinforced and supported by the analysis of electronic record systems. The United Nations Advisory Committee for the Coordination of Information Systems, for example, observes that “as one identifies records systems [in automated environments], one is compelled to describe more the functions of the system and the role it plays in the activities of the office that maintains it.”<sup>8</sup> The accuracy of that observation is borne out by Ahlgren and McDonald’s characterization of an information system as “a collection of records (that is, recorded information) and processes, which are organized to perform a specific set of objectives.”<sup>9</sup> The life cycle of information in such an environment is defined through the continual interaction between documentary processes and the products generated from them.

The systems analysis approach to the appraisal of electronic records might appear to preclude form of material as a relevant concept. Evidence suggests however, that although the formal structures of electronic information transactions are currently in flux, some stabilization in the interest of clarity is inevitable. According to John McDonald, “systems developers are using tools and techniques that facilitate the design of systems to manage the movement of (normally) structured information through pre-defined steps to achieve some pre-defined product (for example, cheques, licences, etc.) in support of a programme activity.”<sup>10</sup> David Bearman, for his part, has observed that in an electronic environment “any given organizational function will be found to have distinctive forms of material, usually with a distinctive internal arrangement to facilitate a particular kind of access.”<sup>11</sup> The existence of “document formalisms” analogous to those associated with the concept of form of material has been reported by information scientists studying electronic records;<sup>12</sup> it also appears that computers can be taught to distinguish among document types. As Bearman puts it, “computers can parse documents for their internal components and mark them with such document marking languages as Standard Generalized Markup Language (or SGML), creating a sort of electronic ‘fingerprint’ of a form of material.”<sup>13</sup> He likens the resulting reference files to records schedules that have been stripped of dates and names of offices; the files “contain a field for SGML-like ‘fingerprints’ and fields for data elements typically found recorded in [a particular] type of record.”<sup>14</sup> From the observations of both McDonald and Bearman, it seems clear that form and function continue to have relevance in electronic record-keeping environments. There is, consequently, a continuing need for an approach to appraisal that focuses on tracing the web of formal and functional associations which characterize institutional memory and provide its documentary traces.

The formal mapping of provenancial and documentary relationships for the purpose of appraisal may be a fairly recent development but, as Sigmond correctly points out, it has always been central to the purpose of archival description.<sup>15</sup> The connection between

administrative function and documentary form traditionally has been drawn out and analysed as part of the process of developing tools for intellectual control and access. The results of the analysis are typically contained in inventories of archival fonds, where we record the administrative history of a creating body; its organizational structure, functions and activities; the scope and content of the records created by that body; and the forms or types of records contained in a sequence or series of records and their internal arrangement. In the Netherlands, the effectiveness of the inventory as a tool for describing provenancial and documentary relationships within a given body of records is rooted in the fact that a standardized methodology for the preparation of inventories and a standardized terminology for naming document types exists, largely as a result of uniform archival training. In North America, however, where the training of archivists is far from uniform, we have been, until recently, somewhat less successful in formally describing provenancial relationships and identifying documentary forms of material in a consistent fashion. This situation is changing rapidly, nevertheless, as descriptive practices are increasingly systematized.

To understand why the situation is changing, we need only to recall that the particular universe of discourse about which we have been speaking revolves around administrative activities. These manifest themselves in a series of transactions which are then embodied in documents which are, in turn, governed by rules of procedure. It is, in brief, a universe eminently suited to standardization—one capable of being broken down analytically and resolved into its constituent elements. To standardize archival description is simply to make what has been implicit, explicit: to extract and name the elements that are commonly captured in archival description; to define the elements in a way that clearly differentiates information pertinent to creators and their functions and activities, from information more clearly relevant to the records created out of those functions and activities; and, finally, to organize those elements in a logical order.

Having a common methodology for preparing archival descriptions, it becomes possible to extract from a description terms which appropriately characterize the various properties of archives: from the administrative history element, for example, terms that identify the functions of an agency; from the scope and content element, form terms, that is, terms which identify document types. The extraction of form and function terms in turn makes possible the development of controlled vocabularies and authority files for those terms. Once they have been standardized through authority control, form and function terms can serve the same purpose as subject headings, that is, to bring together records sharing the same intellectual characteristics. Though it is still largely untested, the discriminating potential of form and function access points is likely to outstrip significantly that of subject access points, since form and function are rooted in concepts more closely in harmony with the transactional nature of archives.

In the Netherlands, the potential of archival authority files may be glimpsed in the *broncommentaren* or source commentaries that have been developed to describe the types of information contained in particular nineteenth-century procedures and forms, and to explain the administrative context in which such procedures and forms were developed.<sup>16</sup> In the United States, similar efforts have been made over the last few years to exploit what has been dubbed “the power of the principle of provenance” for descriptive and other purposes. The Research Libraries Group (RLG) Government Records Project, for example, has developed a controlled vocabulary for function terms which has been incorporated into the *Art and Architecture Thesaurus*'s (AAT) functions hierarchy. The

functions vocabulary describes the characteristics of the action that generated records rather than the contents of the records themselves.

If form terms provide insight into how information is recorded, function terms complete the picture by providing insight into why the records were created. The guidelines for using the AAT functions, hierarchy which were developed for the purposes of the Government Records Project, define three levels of application for function terms, corresponding (more or less) to Schellenberg's hierarchy of administrative action. These levels are, in descending order, function (defined as "an area of responsibility in which an organization conducts activities to accomplish a purpose. For example, protecting environment; assisting education; regulating business"); activity (defined as "actions taken to accomplish a specific function. For example, in order to accomplish the function of protecting the environment, activities may be taken such as: monitoring water pollution; licensing hunters; regulating toxic waste disposal"); and, finally, transactions (defined as "specific actions taken to accomplish an activity. For example, to conduct the activity of licensing hunters, actions taken might include: investigating applicant's police record; recording fingerprints; certifying identity)."<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of the Government Records Project, function terms were applied to administrative histories, such as government agency history records government subdivision history records, and government programme unit history records. Activity terms, on the other hand, were applied to records at the series, subseries or record system level.<sup>18</sup>

Although the concept of function as elaborated in the Government Records Project still requires considerable refinement<sup>19</sup>, its potential for providing meaningful retrieval of archival records is obvious, particularly for on-line searching on regional and national bibliographic databases. Functional access allows researchers to locate documentation directly rather than through circuitous inferences,<sup>20</sup> to determine more precisely whether records are relevant, and to collocate records sharing common functional attributes created in different jurisdictions. According to David Bearman, function terms enable researchers "to cut across jurisdictional boundaries and structural accidents to identify commonalities of human action in administrative environments over time."<sup>21</sup>

A functions vocabulary is of demonstrable value all along the records management-archival management continuum. Administrative history records containing function terms, for example, represent an information resource as valuable to records creators as to more traditional archival users, since such records can be used to document the current missions, objectives and activities of an organization. Functional access may also assist in the identification and comparison of functionally similar records across jurisdictions, thereby facilitating their appraisal. Kathleen Roe and Alden Monroe maintain that "comparing functionally similar records could allow more consistent scheduling of records for disposal or permanent retention. This would assist in ensuring coverage and in identifying duplication between organizations and subdivisions."<sup>22</sup>

A number of archival theorists, among them Max Evans, Richard Szary, Richard Lytle and David Bearman, have long urged archivists to pursue the potential of both form of material authority files and administrative history files, with functions vocabularies as access points - seeing them as essential building blocks in the construction of provenance-driven archival databases. Such databases are envisioned as the archival link in a much larger network of cultural databases (or "knowledge bases") designed to support a broad range of cultural information objectives.

Summarizing recent developments in the Netherlands, Peter Sigmond suggests that “one of the differences between the archivist of today and his predecessors is that he does not just start with the archive which has been transferred to him, reconstructing the organization out of the records, but with a reconstruction of the organization, analysing the functions and procedures, and taking this as a starting-point from which to look at the records and reconstruct the archives.”<sup>23</sup> I would echo the approval implicitly expressed in this observation, which suggests that, in appraising records, the “bottom-up” approach has given way to a more comprehensive “top-down” approach. Nevertheless, I would also assert that the top-down approach is itself just a starting-point and should properly be viewed as a supplement to, not a replacement for, the more traditional bottom-up approach. The illumination of the provenancial and documentary relationships embodied in organizational structures and bureaucratic procedures, and embedded in documentary forms, depends upon an analysis that continually mediates between acts and the documents that result from them. These relationships can only be brought to light through the simultaneous application of a bottom-up analysis, which is most clearly typified by the diplomatic analysis of the genesis, forms and transmission of documents. Such analysis is critical in order to ensure that the documents brought into archival custody actually reflect—accurately and meaningfully—the functions, activities, transactions and rules of procedure that shaped their formation; in other words, that they do what they are supposed to do.

The work currently underway in the Netherlands and the United States provides ample evidence that administrative functions and documentary forms are powerful building blocks in the development of comprehensive, context-driven systems for appraisal, intellectual control and access. We may still be some distance from the electronically-driven golden city populated by archivists and users creating, linking into, and navigating through, provenance-enriched cultural databases and peer data files. If you look closely, nevertheless, you can see its skyline from here.

### Notes

\* This commentary is a slightly revised version of that presented as a response to a paper by Peter Sigmond, “Form, Function and Archival Value: The Use of Structure, Forms and Functions for Appraisal, Control and Reference.” Both the paper and the commentary were given at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Banff, 25 May 1991. An edited version of Dr. Sigmond’s paper was published in *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 141-147.

- 1 Sigmond, “Form, Function and Archival Value,” p. 6.
- 2 Sigmond, p. 3-4.
- 3 See Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science,” *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989), pp. 7-27.
- 4 I have borrowed the characterization of archival relationships as “provenancial” and “documentary” from Terry Eastwood, “Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: A Systematic Approach to Access to Information from the Archives of Contemporary Administration”: paper delivered at a Seminar on Arrangement and Description of Archives held by the International Council on Archives in Koblenz, Federal Republic of Germany, 29 September - 2 October 1990.
- 5 Terry Eastwood, “How Goes It With Appraisal?” Keynote address delivered at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Banff, 22 May 1991, p. 4.
- 6 Duranti, “Diplomatics,” *Archivaria* 28, p. 9.

- 7 Dorothy Ahlgren and John McDonald, "The Archival Management of a Geographic Information System," *Archivaria* 13 (Winter 1981-82), p. 59.
- 8 Advisory Committee for the Co-ordination of Information Systems, *Management of Electronic Records: Issues and Guidelines* (New York, 1990), p. 36.
- 9 Ahlgren and McDonald, "The Archival Management of a Geographic Information System," p. 60.
- 10 Quoted in Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part IV)," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), p. 22.
- 11 David Bearman, "Multisensory Data and its Management" in *Management of Recorded Information: Converging Disciplines*, comp. by Cynthia J. Durance (München/London/New York/Paris/New York, 1990), p. 118.
- 12 Bearman defines document formalisms as "structural features of records that signal their contents to the culturally attuned." See David Bearman, "Authority Control Issues and Prospects," *American Archivist* 52 (Summer 1989), p. 298.
- 13 Bearman, "Authority Control Issues," p. 298.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Sigmond, "Form, Function and Archival Value," p. 4.
- 16 See David Bearman and Peter Sigmond, "Explorations of the Use of Form of Material and Authority Files by Dutch Archivists," *American Archivist* 50 (1987), pp. 249-253.
- 17 [Research Libraries Group Government Records Project], "Guidelines for Using the AAT Functions Hierarchy," Unpublished ms., n.d., p. 2.
- 18 Transactional terms, which would apply to records at the file and in some cases subseries level, were not included within the scope of the project.
- 19 For example, the notion of competence has not been incorporated into the functions hierarchy. Luciana Duranti has explained the difference between function and competence in the following way: "Function is the whole of the activities aimed to one purpose, considered abstractly. Competence is the authority and capacity of carrying out a determined sphere of activities within one function, attributed to a given office or an individual." See Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part III) *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), p. 19, 10.
- 20 David Bearman, "Archives and Manuscripts Control with Bibliographic Utilities," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989) p. 33.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Alden N. Monroe and Kathleen D. Roe, "What's the purpose: Functional Access to Archival Records," Toni Peterson and Pat Molholt, eds., *Beyond the Book: Extending MARC for Subject Access* (Boston, 1990), p. 163.
- 23 Sigmond, "Form, Function and Archival Value," p. 6.