Book Reviews

Archival Theory and Information Technologies: The Impact of Information Technologies on Archival Principles and Methods. CHARLES M. DOLLAR. Informatics and Documentation Series, 1. Oddo Bucci, ed. Macerata: Publications of the University of Macerata, 1992. 117 p.

This book is a nice addition to the electronic records question. It deftly summarizes the current state of information technologies, their impact on bureaucratic work, and the difficulties they have caused archival theory, method and practice in such a way that it is both the best primer on the subject and the most insightful general exposition of the issue now available. The author should also be commended for shunning excessive use of technical language, and for explaining terminology where it is important to conceptual understanding. The notes, the bibliography and the informative annexes (appendices) all reflect judicious decisions to make this book serve a wide audience of archivists and others.

Archival Theory and Information Technologies comes out of an international meeting. Yet it is not the usual hodgepodge of papers and proceedings which passes for serious consideration of a topic or issue. The Italian organizers of the meeting held at the University of Macerata in May 1991 and the various participants who wisely left it to, and/or assisted Dollar to bring together all the material in such concise and incisive fashion are to be warmly commended. Perhaps not every such meeting will find so cogent a summarizer or be worthy of such substantial consideration, but one would like to see more of this and less of the usual unsatisfying fare.

Even thoroughly praiseworthy works may have a flaw or two. One of this book's flaws seems to come from the author's desire to preserve the evidentiary sanctity of the cake while consigning its informational icing to rampant consumption. It is true that the electronic document plays tricks with our senses of what is a record. In the end, the large question in any given case is: Do we have a record of transaction or just information for reference purposes?

It is easier to characterize how radical the effects of the new electronic environment are than it is to provide a convincing explanation of what to do about them. Time and again, I found myself satisfied by Dollar's presentation of the problem, yet unsure

whether there is or he offers a solution. He has the habit of falling back on some reassurances once he has got us thoroughly worked up, which I rather like about him.

For instance, in his discussion of what a record is in the electronic environment, he gets us ready for something radical only to aver that "the use of electronic information technologies has not altered the basic nature and purpose of recordmaking." One hopes not, but that is not the question he happens at the moment to be addressing, which is: How do we distinguish electronic *records* from other electronic *documents?* As far as I can tell, that is the big question. And it is not enough to advise archivists to "define electronic records as electronically communicated and maintained transactions" if the system and the people using it make no distinction between the record and all the other kinds of recorded information.

In that regard, the discussion in Annex C, "Creation of Electronic Documents," illuminates how end users are rarely "in a position to judge whether the applications used are in fact creating records which adequately document the work being performed." It's not so much a matter of documenting how the work is done as it is of knowing what is done. We know that computers greatly assist in the management of information connected with all sorts of processes. The question becomes, How do we extract a record of what was done from the stream of information connected with the process?

We hear that the solution is for the archivist to intervene in the design of electronic information systems. I am rather sceptical of this advice. Conceiving the archivist as *deus ex machina* of information systems design is a little like asking him/her to plug in everywhere. Either administrators will come around to see the need for long-term institutional memory and address it or they will not. No doubt, some archivists of the old breed will be part of the process and some will not. In the end, the medium of the record does make a difference. There is no doubt that we will have to taylor our accumulated experience to the requirements of new media. Beyond that, Dollar questions whether the centralized repository will be able to manage the electronic record of enduring value.

This book deserves close reading by archivists, several times, before a lot else on the subject. I hope it is made accessible to the North American market. Among other things, it would be an excellent basic text on the subject in archival education courses, and should on that score alone have a good market.

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Managing Business Archives. ALISON TURTON, ed. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann Ltd., 1991. 462 p. ISBN 0-7506-0211-2.

Manuals and readers have become a familiar and welcome addition to the archival science bookshelf in the past few years. This British volume, edited by Alison Turton and published in association with the Business Archives Council, is a wide-ranging treatment of the topic of management of business archives. It comprises seventeen articles by various authors, many with impressive credentials and some familiar to an international audience.