Introduction

The Information Age Revisited

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In 1987, the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists adopted as its theme "archives in the information age." It was the first national conference in Canada devoted to the related topics of management of electronic records and the use of automated techniques in archives. Individual archivists and institutions had been grappling with a variety of questions around these topics for years, and the time had arrived to come together as a community to address collective concerns and to share ideas. While this "Information Age" conference raised no new or surprising issues and certainly solved no pressing problems, it encouraged the profession to embrace the opportunities presented by the computer and to recognize the many challenges in dealing with electronic media.

While the mid-1980s may seem recent, they marked the beginning of a change in our perception of the computer both as a source of archives and as an archival management tool. We were being compelled, both by the demands of our sponsors and by our own sense of responsibility to posterity, to deal with a variety of new media in a traditional effort to acquire, describe, and make available records of all kinds. Thanks to the increasingly accessible micro-computer, we were also beginning to appreciate, if sometimes reluctantly, the uses and benefits of the computer as a tool for accessioning, describing, and providing access to records.[1]

The archival community shared, with most of the post-industrial western world, a profound mixture of hope and fear in dealing with the electronic onslaught of the decade. We were prodded by questions about the nature of modern information, the dynamics and dynamism of data, the definition of the electronic record, and the potential role of the archivist as "information" or even "data manager." We were troubled by doubts about the durability of all of our comfortable methodological assumptions, particularly given our very uncertain command of the technology. There was apprehension about the implications of the paperless office and wonder at the promise of the paperless archives. The community did not lack either optimism or energy, however. In general, we embraced the information age as our own coming of age—the prospect of a world (brave and new?) in which our priorities and values would be accorded due respect and in which our unique realm of information would find recognition and renewed purpose.

If we care to compare accomplishments against the hopes of the 1980s, there has to be some disappointment: many of the challenges identified in 1987 remain unaddressed. While we are considerably more 'computer literate', we are only beginning to appreciate how the computer may fundamentally change the way in which we organize and perform our tasks—to recognize

it not only as a tool for the enhancement of traditional techniques, but as an opportunity to rethink our techniques or more effectively exploit traditional methodologies. Our difficulties with the introduction of standards and definition of needs have resulted in a proliferation of software and a lack of coherent direction to the software designer. Our dreams of national, or even regional, archival networks seem to have fallen by the wayside in an era of restraint. We have not come to terms with the ways and means of effectively managing machine-readable records, even in the largest of institutions. Many smaller archives have surrendered all hope of either identifying or controlling the electronically-based and maintained records. Some have been tempted to disregard the electronic record as a true "archival type" and to return to the paper product as the only manageable one. We continue to play catch-up in dealing with new and significant office automation and personal communication technologies, such as electronic-mail and voice-mail. We frequently find ourselves on the sidelines, offering advice and fretting about the consequences, but more often than not, going unheeded. In general, we continue to struggle to establish our own or our patrons' legitimate claim to be "ultimate" end-users, worthy of consideration in the systems-design process.

Were the expectations of 1987 unrealistic? Probably. Will we make the information age our own within the next seven years, by the year 2001? Probably not. Nevertheless, for everyone from the jaded electro-cognoscenti to those who continue to be in the thrall of the multi-meg wonders currently at our disposal, there are sources of pride and encouragement. There are now computers in virtually every professionally-staffed archives in Canada. We are generally better informed and more aware of the demands of machine-readable records and archival automation and we have, along with other users of technology, developed a greater sensitivity to both the existence and the potential of the electronic corporate memory. We are much further along the road to standards and are in an infinitely better position to develop effective networks and take full advantage of the opportunities presented by database and communications technologies. There have been important positive developments in both law and institutional policy with respect to machine-readable records. The *National Archives Act* recognizes electronic records, and many institutions, large and small, have included the treatment of electronic media in their mandates.[2] We have addressed the need for formal education in this specialized area: The ACA curriculum guidelines for both graduate programmes and post-appointment training include provisions for courses in electronic records-handling and automation. Thanks to a growing academic community, we are grappling with theoretical issues around the electronic record. Archivists have, both in Canada and internationally, access to a steadily building bibliography relating to automation. We are witnessing the emergence of specialists in the field of electronic records and even the appearance of that most esoteric of creatures, the "systems guru," in the archival world—individuals who write provocatively on the subject and can advise the community on broader issues and implications.

To observe the distance we have covered since the "Information Age" conference, we may look no further than this issue of *Archivaria*. There are more articles dedicated to the subject of automation here than appeared in all of the issues produced between 1976 and 1987. The ideas treated in these articles point to the greatest challenge that the information age presents to archivists, to raise our eyes beyond the day-to-day concerns of our institutions and to establish our larger professional goals, confirm the nature of our role, and continue to define and refine our objectives in the management of archives and service to society.

Notes

* As the 1987 ACA Conference Programme was very much a collaborative effort, it seemed only fitting to ask the Programme Committee of 1987 to contribute their views and ideas to the development of this piece. Thanks go to Christine Ardern, John Hardy, Mark Hopkins, and John McDonald.

1 It is perhaps useful to note that computers were virtually unknown, even in large Canadian archives, as recently as ten years ago. The Provincial Archives of both Ontario and British Columbia, for example, acquired their first micro-computers for operational purposes in 1985-86 and did not begin comprehensive work in finding aid automation until some years later.

2 The definition of "record" that appears in the *National Archives of Canada Act* (*Statutes of Canada*, c. N-2.5, s. 2), includes "machine-readable record, and any other documentary material, regardless of physical form or characteristics, and any copy thereof." Definitions of this kind also appear in the federal *Access to Information Act* (*Statutes of Canada*, 1980-81-82-83, c. 111, Sch. I "1,", s. 3), and most, if not all, provincial freedom of information and protection of privacy acts, and inform the mandate statements and/or acquisition policies of many archival institutions. It is significant that the specific inclusion of acquisition and access to machine-readable records among the formal responsibilities of archives are increasingly responses to the demands of governments or sponsoring corporate bodies themselves for legal, administrative, or historical preservation purposes.