***Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record-Keeping in an Information Culture***. Geoffrey Yeo. London: Facet Publishing, 2018. xvi, 208 pp. ISBN 978-1-78330-226-0

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We are constantly told that today is the information age and that we live in an information society. Information seems to be both ubiquitous and all-powerful. Information and data are seen as the fuels that turbocharge progress in the 21st century. As records professionals, it is therefore tempting to conclude that our time has come at last, because we commonly assume and assert that we are also information professionals. Most of us will have internalized conceptions of records that argue that records are a type of information and that records contain information. Some go further, claiming that, in the digital age, the distinctions between records, data, and information are disappearing, increasingly irrelevant, and perhaps even counter-productive. The logical outcome of that view is the belief that the previously separate disciplines that have formed the family of information professions are all now converging into a single, indistinguishable, and indivisible profession of information management. Any tendencies to resist this convergence are often portrayed as old-fashioned clinging to outdated notions – as adherence to quaint and precious mindsets that must be jettisoned if we are to embrace and prosper in the breathless new age of information.

Records professionals often struggle to gain traction with power brokers and resource allocators, who may see "records" as being boring, niche, or low-priority and as adding little value to business. We fear being left behind as irrelevant anachronisms in a fast-moving world. As such, it is certainly tempting to rebrand our

efforts in the seemingly sexier attire of "information management" and to adopt the language and mindsets of convergence. There is plenty of evidence of this tendency. Under the leadership of Natalie Ceeney, the UK's National Archives some years ago repositioned itself as the UK government's lead agency for information management. Much of the policy advice on its website was rewritten to foreground "information" while minimizing, if not completely eliminating, any use of the word record. The Records Management Association of Australia renamed itself as Records and Information Management Professionals Australasia. Records managers, especially those in North America, are aligning themselves with the emerging pseudo-discipline of information governance. The National Archives of Australia renamed its Government Recordkeeping Branch as the Government Information Management Branch.[1]

Do these changes stand up to critical scrutiny? How well do we understand the similarities and differences between records, information, and data? How good a grasp do we or anyone else really have of these complex and contested concepts? Have we adequately contemplated where we are going in our rush to adopt the emperor's new clothes of information management? What are the consequences of downplaying, if not entirely denying, those things that make records different from other forms of information and those unique skills that records professionals must have if records are to be managed as records? Can the making and keeping of records continue to be regarded as a separate, distinct, and worthy endeavour in the digital age? Geoffrey Yeo, archival educator and researcher at University College London, addresses these questions in this timely book, which should be read by all records professionals.

Over seven concise chapters, together with a short introduction and conclusion, Yeo carefully builds his argument. His language is clear, dispassionate, and direct. The first five chapters of the book explore the issue and its historical context – raising, but largely refraining from answering, numerous important questions and problems. His historical overview stretches back over 10,000 years of human history, with chapter 2 considering the current digital transition, including notions of fixity and fluidity in the digital domain. Chapter 3 looks at how archivists and records managers have responded to the emergence of the new information culture. Chapters 4 and 5 grapple with the diverse, contested

1 This Branch existed for a number of years, but in 2017 it was subsumed into the larger Collection Management Branch as part of an organizational rationalization and restructure.

concepts of information and data and with common assumptions about how these things relate to records. He disabuses readers of any notion that these concepts enjoy clear and common understandings. We are reminded not only that they are subject to widely divergent definitions in different contexts but also that many of the more common understandings actually make little logical sense. The word *information* is particularly tricky to pin down, and Yeo describes any attempt to do so as like trying to find a way through a hall of mirrors. It is somewhat disconcerting to learn that no one really seems to know what information is – despite the fact that it is all around us. Making sense of it all seems akin to knitting fog.

Just as readers may despair of getting our heads around the whole opaque and slippery topic, Yeo comes to our rescue. The final two chapters provide cogent definitions of what records really are and explain what they really do, why they are not (just) information, and why their function continues to be vital in the digital age. Yeo concludes by suggesting a range of ways we as records professionals can reassert our core purpose in the information age – not by erecting walls between ourselves and our information management colleagues but by being absolutely clear about the differences between our role and theirs, and about how our respective efforts can and should complement each other.

Although the concept of information has been extensively discussed in the literature on librarianship over many years, without much evidence of genuine consensus, it has received remarkably little attention in the records literature. While the term is commonly used in our discourse, it is rarely defined in our policies and standards. According to Yeo, "It is assumed that information is an unproblematic concept, needing little or no further explanation" (p. viii). Yet, many of us seem happy to rebrand or at least realign ourselves as professionals serving a concept that we have made little if any effort to understand. Is information a material thing, a commodity manifested in concrete objects, or is it something more abstract and intangible? How does it relate to data and to knowledge? Do claims that information is an organizational asset stand up to scrutiny? Whatever you may believe about the answer to this question, there appear to be no accounting standards anywhere that allow organizations to value and include their information holdings as assets on their corporate balance sheets.

Yeo's take is that information is an affordance that can be elicited or derived from diverse sources, including records. It is the "product of an interpretive activity" (p. 95) or "a conceptual space for individualised meaning-making"

(p. 97). Photographs are a good case in point here. Yeo asks, Can information "be embedded *within* a photograph" or is it more congruent to argue that it is derived from an examination of a photograph? (pp. 132–33). If we accept Yeo's conception of information as an affordance, then it stands that "it cannot be the kind of entity that we can hope to manage or control" (p. 97). The best we can hope to do is to enable information to be derived by people over time by managing the sources that people interact with as a part of their information-seeking behaviour.

Our view of data, and of how it relates to records, is also problematic and subject to assumptions that are at best superficial and that need to be challenged. By and large, records professionals have tended to be a bit standoffish about data. Because data in many databases is constantly being updated, it lacks stability, fixity, or "recordness." As such, we have traditionally regarded data management as someone else's concern. Yet, in a world where big data and data analytics are increasingly valued, are our skills really of no value? Is there value in fixing data in a persistent form and managing it as records – as evidence of something that was perceived and encoded at a point in time? What is data anyway? Is it something more than just innocent values in database tables? Is "raw" data always a source of autonomous and objective truth, or is it a contingent and context-dependent construct that exists as a reflection of human design decisions, perceptions, prejudices, and social systems? Is the term *raw data* in fact an oxymoron (p. 120)? Clearly, the meaning of *data* is just as contested and complex as that of *information*.

Unpacking how these concepts relate to records is therefore no easy task, but before we can do that, we have to have a clear conception of what records are. Yeo draws on the work of British philosopher John Langshaw Austin, whose work in the 1950s looked at how humans perform acts such as giving orders, apologizing, agreeing, or committing to do something. According to Yeo, "When we write 'I apologise' in an email to someone we have offended, we do not merely send information about an apology; we perform the act of apologising" (p. 135). The email, therefore, is not a piece of information (though information may be derived from it); it is an agent of action. Its retention can afford both information about and evidence and memory of that action. Its performative dimensions are of a complexity that "the simple concept of records as information is not rich enough to encompass" (p. 141).

The acts that records perform are essential to our social systems of rights, duties, commitments, and obligations, which are "the glue that holds human societies together" (p. 151). Make no mistake: records matter. They are not some quaint and archaic subset of the modern, thrusting world of data or information. They matter because they play a unique and vital role in society. According to Yeo, "Our capacity to use records to create rights and obligations and to represent their creation persistently … places records at the foundation of social life and activity" (p. 151).

This concept of what records are and what makes records different should be understood instinctively by records professionals, but it seems it is being forgotten in our rush to repackage our role in the information society. Yeo's book therefore is a necessary corrective – a reassertion and rearticulation of our enduring core purpose. However, knowing what makes our work distinctive and important does not mean that we should not work with our information management colleagues to support the objectives of our organizations or indeed of wider societal and cultural groups. Collaborating and recognizing some shared common ground do not require convergence. As Yeo says, "Both disciplines have a critical interest in the same materials, although they tend to perceive them in different ways. … The perspectives of the different disciplines should be treated with appropriate respect, and careful negotiation will be needed to reconcile them" (p. 193).

Ensuring constructive collaboration and understanding requires that we engage in advocacy with sensitivity and sophistication. We will need to explain our respective roles patiently and regularly. We should not shy away from these responsibilities, but neither should we alienate our colleagues by being too didactic or high-handed. While we and others ignore the complexities of records at our peril, these complexities are not always easy to communicate to others, whose interests and priorities probably lie elsewhere. We must tackle the challenge with some modesty and with confidence – confidence that will be usefully bolstered by a close reading of this excellent book.