

"THE DEATH OF PERMANENCE"¹

by

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Most people of some experience and maturity accept the idea that death, if not just around the corner, is inevitable, and make rational plans for it. Those same rational people, where their jobs, their life styles are concerned, find it much more difficult to accept one of the other basic facts of our time; e.g., the rapid rate of change.

As a five year old, the most interesting man in my life was the village blacksmith, and just where are there village blacksmiths today? Numerous writers have been concerned with the problem. Alvin Toffler has indicated that the symptoms of "future shock" are with us now. William Gray dealt with some aspects of the problem in a recent article in the Records Management Quarterly.² Dr. Herman Kahn touched on the problem in his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists last fall.³ Probably the most recent discussion of some aspects of the problem as it affects records managers was provided in Jack E. Lee's article entitled "The Fifth Estate".⁴

Lee, of course, deals with the various associations in the United States. Whatever the merits of his proposals, he did force me to attempt a brief statement on the situation here in Canada. I don't request that you accept the reasoning of any of us, but I would hope that you read or re-read some of these statements since they could lead us to a better and more meaningful kind of accomplishment in future.

The records manager in Canada is involved in making sure that useful

¹Alvin Toffler, Future Shock, Random House, New York, 1970, 505 pp. The title of this statement in quotes is taken from Toffler's volume, Part One. "Future shock is the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future. It may well be the most important disease of tomorrow." p. 13.

²"Is Records Management Dead?" in Records Management Quarterly, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1970, pp. 23 ff.

³Herman Kahn, "Some Comments on the Archival Vocation" in The American Archivist, Vol. 34, No. 1, January 1971, pp. 3-12.

⁴In Records Management Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 2, April 1971, pp. 5 ff.

information is available and that it can be, and is, communicated to those who need it at a reasonable cost and speed. He's involved in other things as well, but as of now, most people would agree that he is a useful participant in the so-called "Information Industry".

The record manager's role was defined and recognized largely as a result of the paper explosion growing out of World War II. The record manager plays a role, ranging from records birth control to the undertaking function, be it destruction or archival deposit, but he doesn't and won't necessarily do everything in this "Information Industry". Others involved, for example, include (a) the administrator and/or executive; (b) the manual and electronic systems people; (c) the microfilm systems and miniaturization people; (d) the indexing and retrieval specialists; (e) the archivists; (f) some librarians; (g) and the documentalists and information scientists, to mention but a few.

There is overlapping of interests in all of these fields and the multiplicity of local, national and international organizations which attempt to bring like folk together. The Parent Commission Report pretty well expressed the need, when it stated: "the educational system will be effective only to the extent that it produced adults able and anxious to improve and cultivate their capacities."⁵ In other words, our educational systems must not be terminal. Someone else has expressed this idea in another fashion: What we need is "self-learners". The job holder has to keep up with rapid change, through reading, observing, through various forms of continuing education in colleges and universities, and through active participation in such self-help associations as ARMA.

Here in Canada we have a strong and active Canadian Micrographic Society which is currently establishing local chapters across the country. We have a strong and active Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association. Provincial Archivists also meet annually with the Dominion Archivist. We have a strong and useful group of ARMA chapters in Montreal, Toronto, a new one in Vancouver and very likely a new one in Ottawa. There are several data processing groups including the Data Processing Management Association. I could go on to list a dozen more. This should suffice to indicate that a good many of us are rattling around in the same tub! This was brought forcibly to my attention recently when a trained and experienced programmer brought forth from his computer an incomprehensible report simply because he failed, or refused, to consult the forms specialist in his own organization. Now that COM is with us, whether we wish it or not, can any one of you indicate the number of data processing people who attended our recent ARMA microfilming seminar? One manifestation or symptom, if you will, of the problem we face is the shocking number of accomplished and experienced accountants who are resigning their world to the computer boys by taking the earliest possible retirement.

ARMA suggested amalgamation with the AREA organization and was rebuffed. SAA and ARMA have held joint meetings to good effect, and there is some cross-fertilization, such as the election of a Bill Benedon to the Board of the SAA. Here in Canada, a number of groups have honoured me by placing me on their boards, as has been the case with CMS, ARMA and the

⁵Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education, Report Part Two, 1964, p. 327.

Canadian Archives Section of the CHA. In spite of this, however, here in Canada last year, ARMA, Montreal put on a two-day Microfilm Seminar, without the full support of CMS. In the United States, ARMA meets this year in Chicago, and the SAA in San Francisco - on the same days.

If, as now appears pretty sure, COM will take over the job of producing most of the records of our civilization in this coming generation, we'll need archivists to keep the basic permanent records. We'll need computer people to produce the bulk of the operating and accounting records, and we'll have less and less need for people who operate and manage manual records systems, and the need for records-centre and records centre personnel may well decrease materially simply because we'll be using tape and microfilm librarians.

I may not be worried, but some of us who get too set in our ways or who have advanced too far under the "Peter Principle" have need to be. Alvin Toffler indicates that kind of worry is already an identifiable disease.

One reasonable way out, at least for the various organizations in the "Information Business", is to cooperate, amalgamate in some instances, at least coordinate, meet jointly at reasonable intervals, and keep up with every significant technological development. It's already a matter of preventative medicine. We need more of the "self-learners" prepared to adjust to the rapid changes in the way we do "our thing".

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