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SI 580 Understanding Records and Archives: Principles and Practices

Week 3 – The Nature of Archives
Themes of this week

Themes

- What is a record?
- Reliability and Authenticity
- Uniqueness
- Practical and Symbolic
- Key Archival Concepts

“The historical record is, in a sense, the largest database of all.”

Yates, Control Through Communication, p. 275
What is a record?

Themes
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SAA Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology

n. ~ 1. A written or printed work of a legal or official nature that may be used as evidence or proof; a document. – 2. Data or information that has been fixed on some medium; that has content, context, and structure; and that is used as an extension of human memory or to demonstrate accountability. – 3. Data or information in a fixed form that is created or received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity for future reference. – 4. An instrument filed for public notice (constructive notice); see recordation. – 5. Audio · A phonograph record. – 6. Computing · A collection of related data elements treated as a unit, such as the fields in a row in a database table. – 7. Description · An entry describing a work in a catalog; a catalog record.

What is a record?

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Key concepts

- Perspective on “record” influenced by your general view of the world:
  - Positive vs. post-modern
  - Logic and rules vs. discourse and power
- Records as a form of evidence
  - Subjective, situational, partial
- Records as a form of information
  - Recorded, created (received), maintained in business transaction
- Records provide evidence and information

• Yeo, Concepts of Record, 2007-08.
What is a record?

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Angelika Menne-Haritz: “what can be read in the texts [of records] is called information… What can be read between the lines, in signs, symbols, or even in the composition of texts … is evidence.”

ICA Committee on Electronic Records, 1997. (Yeo, pp. 325 and 330)
- Records comprise “content, context, and structure sufficient to provide evidence” of the activities in which they were produced.
- Provenance, physical and intellectual form, and incorporation in record-keeping system.

• Yeo, Concepts of Record, 2007-08.
What is a record?

- Records can be documents or byproducts; activities or probative.

- Yeo: Records are “persistent representations of activities…”

- “… or other occurrences…”

- “… created by participants or observers of those occurrences or by their authorized proxies…”

- “…or sets of such representations representing particular occurrences.”

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Key concepts
- Yeo, Concepts of Record, 2007-08. p. 337
- p. 136
What is a record?

- **Prototype:** a mental model of typical features or an exemplar
  - Common example and fuzzy examples
  - Intention of the creator is paramount
  - Conscious/separate records versus unconscious and integrated records
- **Information products and records = boundary objects**

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Yeo, Concepts of Record, 2007-08.
Forms and Record Formats

Archival and Records Management Practice

- Public Records Exception to the Hearsay Rule
- Business Records Exception to the Hearsay Rule
  - at or near the time of the event
  - by or from a person with knowledge
  - in the regular course of business
  - as a regular practice of business
  - and a custodian of the records or other qualified witness can demonstrate to the court’s satisfaction that these requirements are met

- Best Evidence Rule
- Implications for a Records Management Program
  - written procedures
  - training
  - audits

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Reliability

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“… a record is considered reliable when it can be treated as a fact in itself, that is, as the entity of which it is evidence.” (p. 6)

- Form (complete) in relation to needs of the socio-juridical system
- Process of creation (body of rules)

“… degree of completeness and degree of control of the procedure of creation are the only two factors that determine reliability of records.”

Original versus Copy

Themes
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Key concepts

- By nature original record is more reliable than a copy, because...first complete document with consequence
  - primitiveness
  - completeness
  - effectiveness

- Copies of original records can fully meet criteria for reliability and authenticity

• Duranti, Reliability and Authenticity, 1995.
Authenticity

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“…a record is authentic when it is the document that it claims to be.”

“Authentic, unreliable records are of no use to present and future users.” (p. 8)

“…electronic records might be authentic (because of a fairly high attention to security and transmission processes) but they are certainly not reliable.”

…we should be more concerned with the creation of reliable records…. 

Records Management Theory

Themes
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Archival and Records Management Theory

- Dutch Manual (Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 1898)
  - Original order
  - Provenance
  - Physical Defense of Archives
  - Moral Defense of Archives

Idea of Uniqueness in Archives

Themes
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Records (artifactual)
Information (duplication/publication)
Processes (functional view)
Aggregations (distinct assemblages)

Idea of Uniqueness in Archives

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- Intangibility
- Mutability
- Readers and writers
- Connectability

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- Does uniqueness have any value today?
- How much of this idea uniqueness is associated with copying?
- How do we document uniqueness?

• O’Toole, Uniqueness, 1993.
Symbolic archives

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Practical and symbolic
Key concepts

- Records are a mix of practical and symbolic
- Symbolic meaning affects form
- Symbolic record making
- Pomp and circumstance

• O’Toole – Symbolic Significance, 1993.
Symbolic archives

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Reverence for records
- Domesday Book, 1086
- Digitized in early 1980s
- Rescued fifteen years later (CAMILEON)
  - http://www.atsf.co.uk/dotext/domesday.html for an overview of the original digitization effort.
  - http://www.si.umich.edu/CAMILEON/domesday/domesday.html for information on Camileon project’s efforts to rescue the digital version.

Hostility toward records
- Orwell’s sense of controlling the past

• O’Toole – Symbolic Significance, 1993.
Key concepts discussed

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Key concepts

- **Record**

- **Provenance**

- **Original order**

- **Reliability**

- **Authenticity**

*Pearce-Moses, Glossary of Archival..., 2005.*
Thank you!

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